スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❶

# 白魔術都市の王子（セイルーン）

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

# Slayers Special Volume 1
# The Prince of the City of White Magic

## By Hajime Kanazaka

## Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson (March 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Editor's note: With this volume, the translation project is complete Yay! (I worked backwards)

This is volume 1 so it’s probably the first volume most people will read.

If you like this I have also done Lost universe and will be doing crosscadia and maybe other kanazaka series after that.

# The Prince of the City of White Magic

"Excuse me—by any chance, are you a sorceress?"

A man called out to me in a certain small village. It happened just after I had ordered a second helping of the "Innkeeper’s Special Dinner Set" at the only small inn in town.

I shifted my eyes toward the man and gave a small, silent nod.

Now, this "silent nod" business usually looks quite cool and composed, but in this particular instance, it wasn't for dramatic effect—it was simply because my mouth was currently stuffed full of food. Naturally, I kept that a secret from him.

My attire consisted of a jet-black mantle and robe, a bandana, a necklace, and a brilliant jeweled talisman set into the dagger at my hip. If I weren't a sorceress dressed like this, I’d have to be a traveling performer or just a complete weirdo.

The man beamed. He was dressed as a priest and was quite handsome—at an age where you could still just barely call him a "young man." In a few years, he’d likely turn into a very charming middle-aged gentleman.

"Thank goodness... I’ve been looking for someone. This is such a small village, you see. There’s no one here who looks like they could provide any military strength..."

"Strength?"

Having managed to swallow my food without him noticing, I parroted his words back at him. Apparently, he wasn't trying to hit on me.

"If you're willing—I’d like you to help us with a certain job..."

"For starters—why don't you tell me the details?"

I made a conscious effort to keep my voice low and steady. I’ve had instances where I answered in my natural, girlish voice and had the request rescinded on the spot. In this world, bluffing is everything.

"Then, let's move to the table in the back..."

"Before that..." I cut him off with a hand. I raised my voice: "Hey, lady! Bring my extra helping to the back table, please!"

...I noticed the man was looking at me with half-closed, deadpan eyes. This was bad.

"Well then, shall we?" I said in a dignified tone, despite my inner panic.

Naturally, his eyes stayed deadpan.

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There was already someone at the table.

He was a mountain of a man in his forties with a bearded face, a sturdy build, and a massive Buster Sword strapped to his back. If he were a bit shorter, he'd pass for a large dwarf; as he was, he could easily pass for a bandit king.

I tensed up.

No matter how much magic I can use, I'm still just a single, lovely, delicate young girl (referring to me, obviously. No, really). Getting into a brawl with a bandit in a place like this would be...

"I have found someone," the man who led me here said with a polite bow.

"Uhm," the big guy grunted, giving a grand nod.

He didn't even try to stand up from his chair in the presence of a lady.

*Bandits. These guys are definitely bandits.* If I were to accept a job from people like this, nothing good would come of it.

"For now—please, have a seat."

The man gestured to the seat across from the big guy. I sat down silently, without letting my guard down for a second.

"Before we speak, I shall establish proof of my identity," the big guy said, staring at me with eyes that were clearly not those of an ordinary person.

*Don't bother. Whatever it is, it's probably—*

Suddenly, a dagger was thrust out in front of me. Not the blade, but the hilt. Engraved amidst the flashy (but not tacky) decorations was a crest I recognized.

*Wait, this crest is...*

"Exactly," the guide said, puffing out his chest more than necessary. "To tell you the truth, this gentleman is none other than Prince Philionel El Di Seirune, the first in line to the throne of the City of White Magic!"

*Sliiiiiiiide...*

To the sound of my mantle ripping as it caught on the chair, I slowly slid off the seat

and onto the floor.

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For a moment, the world literally went dark!

If you asked ten people to put a word in front of "Prince," nine of them would think of "Charming," and eight of those would get embarrassed by the cliché and look for a different word. But that just proves the image of a prince—noble, elegant, and of course, handsome—is firmly established. I was no different until five seconds ago.

I had heard rumors that Prince Philionel of Seirune was traveling incognito in this area. To be blunt, I had even formed a meticulous plan: *“Meet the prince by chance, the handsome prince is awestruck by my charm and magic... I mean, he falls in love at first sight, proposes on the spot, and I successfully marry into the elite.”*

That plan, along with my entire value system, collapsed instantly.

He was almost certainly the real deal. No idiot would risk their life by impersonating a prince just to trick a lone sorceress. Impersonating royalty is an unconditional death sentence if you're caught.

And true enough... as long as the current King is in office, a prince is a prince whether he's twenty or forty. Come to think of it, I’d never actually heard how old the "Prince" of Seirune was. I had been looking at him through the filter of the "Prince" archetype.

Reality is... deeper than I thought.

"Are you alright?"

"I am definitely not alright," I said to the man who spoke with zero actual concern in his voice. I managed to crawl back onto my chair.

"We are traveling incognito, so please don't be so stiff."

*That's not the problem...*

"Oh, and I am his attendant, the priest Randy. If possible, I’d like to know your name—"

"—Lina. Lina Inverse."

The moment I introduced myself—

"Oh!" The big guy (it’s too cruel to call him a prince...) and Randy shouted in unison. Despite appearances, I’m actually quite famous.

"Then you're that Magical Girl!"

"Lina the 'Bandit Killer'!"

*Sliiiiiiide...*

I slid off the chair again. My mantle was now beyond repair. What on earth are people saying about me behind my back!?

"Uhm, I have heard much of your reputation!"

"I hear the number of bandit brigades you've forced into disbanding after stripping them of their assets reaches into the thousands."

*Liar! Big fat liar!* That's a gross exaggeration—the number is off by at least one digit!

Now, don't misunderstand me. While Randy's words are partially true, I only ever target bandits. I don't have the bad taste to enjoy bullying innocent civilians. (Though I do enjoy beating down non-innocent, non-ordinary people.)

*Ahem.*

More than anything, when you're a sorceress, you need funds. If you don't believe me, you there—yes, you living near the City of White Magic with enough money to eat without working—go to a large "Magic Shop" and say, "I'd like a plate full of Cloudia Nuts, please." I guarantee you'll be wandering the streets tomorrow with nothing but a plate of nuts to your name.

Once, when I stopped by my hometown, I spent enough money to buy a small castle (soldiers included) on a secret medicine from Bamun. My sister's stray cat knocked it over. In my shock, I accidentally wiped out about five nearby bandit groups. It's a heartwarming little episode.

A folly of youth, you might call it. Or maybe not.

Anyway, I don't deserve such strange titles. I think.

"...What is with this 'Magical Girl' and 'Bandit Killer' stuff...?"

Randy looked puzzled. "The rumors say you introduce yourself that way everywhere you go..."

"I do not!"

"Now, now, it matters not," the big guy cut in. It *does* matter. "You may call me Phil. We are incognito, and 'Philionel' is a bit of a mouthful anyway." He gave a rugged grin.

I appreciated that. If he had told me to call him "Prince," my only option would have been to run away.

"Now, business... Randy."

"Right." The priest began explaining the job.

The case itself was mundane. Monsters had settled in a cave near the village; they were trampling fields, stealing livestock, and had even stolen a necessary healing orb from the home of the village's only priest/doctor. It was so petty it almost brought tears to my eyes.

However, Uncle Phil, seeing this during his travels, got fired up: *"I cannot allow my precious subjects to suffer such things!"* and decided to embark on a monster hunt—a very old-fashioned hobby.

"However, having only Randy as military strength is too reckless. This is a small village with no standing guards. Recruiting volunteers from the villagers would be problematic... Just as we were wondering what to do, you appeared," Phil explained after Randy finished.

"Only Randy? Aren't *you* going to fight?" I blurted out.

"Now see here!" Randy scolded me.

...Ah, right. I forgot for a second, but Phil is a successor to the throne (I refuse to say prince). It's just that he looks like he'd be more at home swinging that Buster Sword...

"Well... normally, as the one destined to carry the burden of this country next, it would be my duty to take the lead and fight for my subjects..." Phil looked a bit troubled. At the very least, he wasn't a typical selfish noble. "How should I put it... despite my appearance, I am a pacifist..."

"LIAR!"

Before I knew it, I was screaming at the top of my lungs.

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"Well, putting that aside."

Phil lightly brushed off my outburst, even though it was the kind of comment you usually can't recover from. This was proof of his extraordinary character. Or maybe he's just dense.

"Of course, I cannot simply leave it to you two and watch from the sidelines. I shall

accompany you, though I may be of little help. At the very least, we must recover the stolen orb—some people have already fallen ill. I am the client, and the reward is..."

It wasn't a bad deal. I was bored anyway. I decided to take the job.

"Oh! You'll accept!" Randy, whose presence was becoming increasingly thin next to Phil's intensity, cried out in joy. "Then let's prepare to depart—"

"—Wait. You mentioned people are sick. Priest Randy, if you know any healing spells, shouldn't you cast them on those people before we leave?"

"Ah, well..." Randy scratched his head awkwardly. "My title of 'Priest' is more of an administrative rank. I can use simple 'Healing' spells, but... how about you?"

"Same here."

Phil, listening to our conversation, looked confused. "Can't you cure illnesses with 'Healing'?"

*Are you really the heir to the City of White Magic!?*

I almost screamed again. Seyruun is called the City of White Magic simply because it has an extreme concentration of such facilities; it doesn't mean the rulers are experts in sorcery. Another misconception based on an image.

Every living creature has an innate ability to recover from wounds. "Healing" magic temporarily and drastically increases that potential to speed up recovery. The reason it doesn't work on illnesses is that a sickness is caused by "bad elements" (known in sorcerous jargon as "germs") entering the body. If you carelessly cast "Healing," you might increase the potential of the "germs" as well, often making the illness worse.

Before I left on my travels—back when I was a novice who didn't know that and was itching to use my new "Healing" spell—my sister back home caught a light summer cold. I proudly and confidently cast "Healing" on her, and she immediately developed pneumonia. It's a hilarious story.

—After she recovered, she beat me to a pulp, though.

I didn't feel like explaining all that to the big guy. Call it prejudice, but I felt like he wouldn't understand even if I tried.

"Well, that's just how the world works," I summarized.

"I see, so that's how it is," Phil said, looking strangely convinced.

We reached the site easily. It wasn't far from the village.

"This is it," Phil said to Randy. Phil was wearing battered leather armor, and Randy was in a tattered robe.

If you're wondering why they looked like that, well, it's a minor thing...

There was a large waterfall on the way, and I suddenly threw a tantrum about wanting to bathe. I hate being sticky with sweat. (Though I've never met anyone who *likes* it.) So, I had a sudden idea and blasted a Fireball into the waterfall basin to make an instant bath. It was magnificent.

But the two of them came running, startled by the noise. In my embarrassment, I accidentally treated them to an Explosion Array.

*"A maiden's bashfulness is so cute,"* was my excuse, but for some reason, they didn't agree.

Anyway, we were now standing before a large, yawning black entrance. It wasn't just a cave; it looked like an ancient structure—a massive tomb or something.

"Let's gooo!"

"Yeah!" I shouted enthusiastically to get into the mood. Randy, whose presence was fading further, just nodded silently.

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Actually, come to think of it... even if the interior was spacious, it was still a confined space. This meant I couldn't use my favorite indiscriminate, wide-range, unscrupulous offensive spells like Fireball, Explosion Array, or Dragon Slave.

Now, don't judge my character just because I love offensive spells as much as I love three meals a day. That would be prejudice. I think.

Anyway, if I used those here, I'd either be charred by back-fire or buried under collapsing debris. I had to stick to concentrated, single-point spells. I led the way, holding a short sword with a "Lighting" spell cast on it like a torch. The air smelled like moldy bread.

"I truly dislike places like this!" Phil said. "Dark, damp, and utterly unforgivable! I cannot fathom the mindset of monsters who choose to live in such a place!"

*Gaaah! Shut up!* He was right behind me. He was two heads taller than me, and having him grumbling loudly right over my head was incredibly annoying.

"Shh! Be quiet!" I stopped. It wasn't just the annoyance; I had spotted something

moving in the darkness ahead. "Something’s there!"

"Ho ho!" Phil sounded strangely excited. Randy, at the very back, didn't even make a sound.

I chanted a simple spell and tossed a small ball of light from my palm toward the ceiling. The brilliant light illuminated the mossy walls, revealing about a dozen or so Orcs.

"Aw, how cute." I stepped forward. "Against these guys, one 'Flare Arrow' will do the trick. Leave it to me."

I don't think I need to explain the spell; it’s exactly what it sounds like. If I’m in top form, I can manifest multiple arrows at once, making it more like a "Flare Shower." I’m bragging, of course. And currently, I’m in top form. Twenty Orcs would be no problem.

"Wait just a moment!" Phil barked, stopping me. "I shall persuade them! I do not care for needless slaughter!"

I nearly tripped over my own feet. Ignoring me, Phil stepped out and stood before the Orcs.

"Listen well, Orcs!" Phil began his persuasion. In human language. "We must recover a certain orb from here! If you are the ones who have it, return it quietly! If you have nothing to do with this, move aside! I am a pacifist by nature and do not wish to take your lives! However, if you refuse to listen to my warning... well, regardless of me, the violent sorceress behind me will not remain silent!"

*Who are you calling a "violent sorceress"!?*

"Now! What will it be!" Phil took a heavy step forward.

The Orcs scrambled back, overwhelmed by his sheer presence. Even if they couldn't understand human speech, they could tell they were being scolded by someone terrifyingly powerful.

"Now!" As he took another step, the Orcs—realizing they stood no chance—turned tail and bolted.

"You see!" Phil laughed heartily, looking proud. "Even if words don't reach them, if you approach with sincerity and a true heart, there is nothing that cannot be resolved through discussion! This is a fine example! Great is pacifism!"

...I think something’s off there...

Randy’s presence was becoming even thinner. Well, Phil’s was so intense it couldn't be helped. Anyway, we continued our trek.

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Next, we encountered a large Ogre. Even Phil’s "persuasion" wouldn't work on this.

"Finally, my turn." I handed my sword-torch to Phil. I chanted a spell and thrust my hands forward. "Dill Brand!" (Crushing Vice!)

A long ribbon of light snaked out from my palms. I could control its movement freely with my hands.

"Call me Your Majesty!" I shouted a nonsensical joke while crushing the Ogre in a single blow. Applause, please.

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"A Troll this time!?" A Troll's regenerative ability is off the charts. A small cut will literally heal before your eyes.

"Damu Brass!" (Vibration Bomb!) With my spell, the Troll’s head was blown to smithereens.

"Oh! This one is a Minotaur!"

"Mono Volt!" (Lightning Break!)

"A Salamander!"

"Freeze Brid!" (Glacier Blast!)

"A Vampa—"

"Dug Haut!" (Dust to Dust!)

"...Is it just me, or does this feel a bit... lacking in nuance?" Phil said, sounding bored.

"Really?" I replied.

---

We still hadn't found the orb. Maybe it was deeper in.

"Anyway, let's keep going." We headed down an incredibly long, sloping passage. We must have been quite deep by now. "Ugh, this is so annoying," I said, brushing away thick spiderwebs and thin ropes on the ground.

...Thin ropes?

*Clunk*.

A heavy sound echoed from far behind us. *Rumble, rumble, rumble*... The sound of something rolling. I looked back cautiously.

—Ah, naturally. A massive boulder was rolling down toward us. It’s a classic dungeon trap, the kind you hear about in ballads.

...This is no time for commentary!

"GYAAAAAAAH!" I bolted. Phil ran alongside me. But the slope seemed endless, and the boulder was gaining speed. The outlook was not promising.

"Can't you do something with your spells!?"

But if I used a spell strong enough to shatter that boulder, the walls would cave in. At best, we’d be buried alive.

"I can't!" I started to say, but then an idea hit me. "Leave it to me!" I gave a thumbs-up and a wink, then started chanting. It was a bit choppy since I was running.

"Hah!" I spun around and fired at the boulder. "Val Flare!" (Fire Lance!) It’s basically a concentrated version of Flare Arrow, but under the right conditions, its heat is equal to a Fireball—enough to melt iron.

It plunged perfectly into the boulder.

"You idiot!" Phil cursed as we ran side-by-side, pursued by a boulder that was now a glowing lump of lava. The air was sweltering. "What do you mean 'Leave it to me'!? I feel like the situation just got worse!"

He was imagining things. I was already preparing the next spell.

"The finishing blow!" I spun again and fired "Van Rehl" (Ice Lance) at the boulder—the one effective against Fire Dragons and such.

"Not again..." Phil’s words were cut off by a muffled *CRACK!* as the giant rock shattered.

"—And there you have it," I said with a smug smile.

"How did you do that?" he asked, looking amazed.

"I utilized thermal expansion caused by the temperature difference."

"....." I looked at Phil’s face and changed my explanation. "Basically, it’s like how a hot clay pot cracks if you suddenly pour cold water on it."

"Oh, I see!" He finally understood.

Anyway, we were safe... "Wait!" I realized for the first time.

"What is it?"

"Randy is gone!"

"Oh, now that you mention it!"

How cold-hearted. Regardless, the thin-presenced priest had finally vanished from before us entirely!

"Well, whatever. We can look for him on the way back," Phil said, dismissing this crisis in a single sentence.

"True," I agreed just as coldly.

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Finally, the climax! In a room deep within the labyrinth, a sorcerer was waiting for us meaningfully. If this isn't a climax, I don't know what is.

"I have been waiting for you, Prince Philionel."

"STOP ITTTT!" I screamed at the sorcerer’s oily greeting.

"?"

"Don't call this man a 'Prince'!" I still hadn't recovered from the gap between reality and the image. My lack of a breakdown until now was purely thanks to escapism. Hearing him called "Prince" to my face was more painful than a direct hit from a Fireball.

"I don't quite get it..." the black-robed sorcerer said, sounding annoyed at having his pace ruined. "Anyway, your journey ends here. Prepare yourselves."

*What are you saying to the Great Lina Inverse?*

"You scoundrel! Why would you target someone as gentle and quiet as me!?" Phil yelled. *Who are you talking about?*

"Because I asked him to."

A man appeared along with the voice.

"You! Randy, why!?"

Yes—it was undoubtedly the incredibly thin-presenced priest Randy himself. Phil

shouted in shock. (Though you could argue his shouting is just his normal speaking voice.) In contrast, I remained perfectly calm, resting a hand on my hip.

"I knew you were the mastermind all along."

"W-what!?" Everyone stared at me in shock. "How long have you known!?" Randy (no need for the 'Mr.' anymore) looked visibly shaken.

—Actually, I was bluffing. I hadn't thought about it until just now, but I've always wanted to say that line once. I just took the opportunity...

"Well, fine," he said. "Despite being the third in line for the throne, I have been neglected all this time because of your overwhelming presence!"

I see, that feeling—wait, what!? "Third in line!?" I looked at Phil. They looked nothing alike. "Is that true?"

"Yep," Phil nodded simply.

*Wait! This is a full-on royal succession feud!*

"Besides, you don't fit the image of a King of Seyruun at all!" Randy shouted.

*Exactly!* But then again, I had my doubts about whether Randy had the making of a king either.

"I see..." Phil said in a strained voice. "About six months ago, assassins started targeting me specifically, and I thought it was a bit strange... so it was all your doing..."

*Notice it sooner, old man.*

"It was worth having my subordinate sorcerer set a trap and wait here."

"—So, the monsters living here were..."

"Naturally, I had them do it."

"So I was just the patsy? Your plan was probably for me to kill Phil, and then you'd 'punish' me for it, right?" I asked.

"Exactly as you guessed."

...How cliché. With a personality that dull, you can't blame Phil for Randy's thin presence.

"And—what do you plan to do after you take over the kingdom?"

"Eh?" Randy stammered when I pressed him. "What do I plan... well, you know... it'll be fun!"

*They exist! People like this!* People who want to be king for no reason, or Demon Kings who want to conquer the world for no purpose! The world is a troubled place.

"Unforgivable!" Phil was getting fired up on his own.

"Whatever! This is your grave! Do it!" At Randy's command, the sorcerer moved, shouting with overly dramatic and unnecessary gestures. *These guys exist too.*

"Come forth, my ally, the Brass Demon Galundia!"

The floor glowed as a magic circle appeared. It was too dark to see, but a summoning circle had been drawn there. A giant shadow was born within the light. A Brass Demon.

I remarked, "Having only monsters as friends... what a lonely guy."

"SHUT UP!" the sorcerer barked, genuinely angry.

---

A Brass Demon. Not very famous, but its power is greater than the well-known Lesser Demon. Naturally, half-baked magic won't work. Of course, I had plenty of spells in stock to take it down, but since this was the big scene, I wanted to finish it with something flashy!

While I was thinking, the demon began its disgusting walk toward us. Then—

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH!"

Next to me, Phil snapped. He pointed a finger straight at the Brass Demon.

"To harm my subjects and even borrow the power of such a monster just to assassinate me...! No matter how much of a pacifist I am, this is unforgivable! Stand still and receive your punishment!"

He sprinted forward.

"Wait, old man!" Before I could even stop him—

"PACIFIST CRUUUUUSH!"

Uncle Phil's punch—screaming a nonsensical finishing move name—easily shattered the Brass Demon's ribs.

*No way!*

"HARMLESS KIIIIIICK!"

The demon’s massive body flew through the air, taking the sorcerer and Randy with it as they slammed into the wall. Then, they all stopped moving.

Aaaaaaaaah.

"Did you see the power of a pacifist!?"

At the utterly absurd turn of events, I froze with my eyes turned into dots. Uncle Phil, *this* is what you call "lacking in nuance."

---

"Well, that’s that settled."

This was after we returned to the village and gave the orb back to the doctor. Phil handed me a reward slightly larger than promised and said he was heading back to the capital.

"I caused you quite a bit of trouble."

*It was a lot of trouble.*

"I’m sure we’ll meet again."

*I don't particularly want to.*

"Well then, farewell."

"Yeah, yeah."

He turned his back and walked away without looking back. I watched him for a long time. I wasn't trying to create an atmosphere; I just hadn't recovered from the shock yet. It’ll probably take a while.

*Terrifying... the pacifist!*

Staring after him with dotted eyes, I thought to myself:

*This country... doesn't have much time left...*

## (The Prince of the City of White Magic — END)

# Lina’s Revenge?

It happened absolutely out of nowhere.

"Lina Inverse! Prepare to die!"

"Hyeeeeeh!?"

I pulled back just in time as a spearhead grazed the tip of my nose.

"Wha— wha— wha...!"

I almost tumbled over, but I managed to regain my balance, spring up from my chair, and face my attacker.

We were in a small eatery in Tales City, a merchant town. I had been approached by a man about a job; we were having lunch together, and the moment I introduced myself, the attack began.

My assailant was a girl who had been sitting to my right. As for the man I’d been talking to, he apparently decided he didn't want any part of this mess and vanished in the blink of an eye.

"What was that for!? Who do you think you are!?"

"Silence!"

Her blue eyes glared at me with sharp intensity. There was practically a fire burning in them.

*...Doesn't look like she's in the mood for a calm chat.*

"For my brother’s sake—prepare yourself!"

"Wait—hold on a second!?"

Dodging the thrusting spear, I dove out of the shop. *Blast it! I’ve only eaten half my meal!* Still, look on the bright side: at least I don't have to pay the bill. Lucky me.

...Actually, considering the circumstances, "lucky" might be a bit of a stretch.

Out on the main street in broad daylight, a crowd gathered instantly. Street brawls aren't exactly rare, but the sight of a young girl with a spear chasing a lovely young sorceress (that would be me... just for the record) isn't something you see every day.

Naturally, as a great sorceress and warrior, I could have finished her off in an instant if

I felt like it. In fact, of all the fools who have tried to make a name for themselves by attacking me, only a handful have stayed standing longer than it takes to toast a slice of bread. (Bragging!)

To quote a certain female sorceress: *"Kill all the villains with offensive spells!!"* That's the spirit!

...Now, you there, the humanitarian. Don't give me that look. I'm telling you, villains have no human rights! Generally speaking, if a crooked guy steals someone's stuff or a freak loves the sight of blood more than his three meals a day, society calls them "bandits" or "berserkers" and treats them like Goblins or Kobolds. That's proof enough!

However, because we were in a crowded town—and more importantly, because that "brother's sake" line was bugging me—I held back from using my beloved offensive spells. I have amazing self-control!

A normal sorceress would have reflexively scattered Fireballs everywhere the moment that spear grazed her nose.

...*Actually, maybe a "normal" one wouldn't do that*.

Regardless, she took my lack of retaliation as a sign of weakness and pressed her attack relentlessly.

"Stop running and stay still!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

I ran; she chased. The spear sliced through the air, old men fell over in shock, cows got spooked and started rampaging... honestly, to a bystander, it must have been the best show in town.

Unfortunately, I was the one in the middle of it. I wasn't in a position to enjoy the show.

As I sped past an antique shop, I finished my incantation. Gripping a small knife hidden in my sleeve, I rounded the next corner to the right!

The girl rounded the corner after me and skidded to a halt. I was waiting for her. Seizing the opening, I flicked my wrist!

The knife flew true, piercing the target.

...Wait, don't misunderstand. I didn't hit *her*. My knife pierced her **shadow** on the ground.

In that instant, her body stiffened.

"Ugh...!"

She strained with all her might, beads of sweat forming on her forehead, but she couldn't budge.

"It’s no use," I said, intentionally using a cold tone. "Shadow Snap. It’s a technique that binds the opponent’s movement through the astral side. You can't break it with physical strength."

Unlike the flashy big spells I usually prefer, this one lacks impact but requires a bit of finesse. Of course, as the name implies, it doesn't work without a shadow. If it suddenly got cloudy right now, the spell would break instantly—a rather pathetic weakness.

"Now then... suppose you tell me exactly what this is all about?"

"What is there to tell!?" she screamed.

She looked to be about seventeen or eighteen. A little older than me—maybe around my sister’s age back home. She was a beautiful girl with short blonde hair; it seemed a waste to have her be a warrior. She wore polished white breastplate armor with gold trim and was armed with a long spear.

"What happened six months ago... don't tell me you’ve forgotten!"

She couldn't move her body, but her mouth worked fine. This spell was originally designed for interrogations, after all.

"Six months ago, huh...?"

I searched my memories. Wiping out bandit brigades left and right, venting my frustrations on a Blue Dragon when I was feeling down, firing off random Dragon Slaves for fun when I felt homesick...

It should have been a string of peaceful, ordinary days. I didn't remember doing anything to earn a "vengeance" label... well, I wouldn't say I have a *completely* clean record. But I’d never laid a hand on an honest, law-abiding citizen.

"Wait, by any chance, was this 'brother' of yours a bandit or something?"

"He was not! He was an honest farmer!"

"That’s weird. It must be a mistake..."

"There's no mistake or misunderstanding! You said it clearly back then!"

Just then—

"Out of the way! Out of the way! Move it!"

A raucous voice and the sound of wheels interrupted us. A group of men who looked like soldiers came barreling through in a carriage. They must have been hauling urgent cargo.

"Don't loiter in the middle of the street! You're in the way! Clear the road!"

Come to think of it, we *were* standing right in the middle of the main thoroughfare. I hopped out of the way just as the carriage sped past at a terrifying pace. They were in a real hurry.

"Wait—AAHHH!"

A scream from the girl.

Oh, right. I still had the Shadow Snap active, didn't I?

I spun around toward her in a panic.

...But I wasn't going to be fast enough.

*WHAM!!*

Yep. She got hit.

---

"Ugh... nng..."

It was night by the time she finally came to.

I'd taken a twin room at an inn, carried her there, and treated her injuries. Naturally, I didn't want her rampaging again the moment she woke up, so I used the shadows cast by the lamp to put her back in a Shadow Snap.

"Looks like you're awake," I said, making my voice as gentle as possible. If I'd gone with, *"Ohoho, finally awake, are we?"* I'd have sounded like a total villainess.

She looked like she was about to scream, but after realizing her situation, she just stayed quiet and glared at me.

"About what happened today... it's definitely a misunderstanding. I think we can clear it up if we talk. So please. Trust me and just listen."

I stared straight into her eyes. If you want to give weight to a bunch of words, it’s all in the gaze. No matter how much truth you speak, if you look away, it just sounds like nonsense. A sincere expression and a steady, slightly moist gaze—that’s the secret to persuasion!

"Hmph," she said with a deadpan look. "You tie someone up with rope, hang them from the ceiling, use a weird spell to paralyze them, and then say, 'Trust me'?"

Oh.

...Now that she mentioned it, my current treatment of her might have lacked a bit of persuasive power.

"Don't let it bother you," I said. "I’m not bothered at all..."

"Is that so?"

For some reason, my attempt to smooth things over only made her expression more hostile.

---

According to her story, six months ago, the sorcerer who killed her brother had the audacity to use my name. Of course, I had no memory of such a thing. In fact, I’d never even heard of her village, let alone visited it.

An impostor.

When you get as famous as I am, there’s always someone who uses your name to pull off some low-life stunt. The "enemy" she was looking for was likely one of those types.

Naturally, she didn't believe my explanation right away.

"You can say whatever you want! But you told me clearly! Standing there next to my fallen brother! You said: *'My name is Lina Inverse. If you wish to avenge your brother, follow me wherever I go. That is, if you wish to be killed in turn!'*"

"I don't do stuff like that! I'm serious! ...Wait, you said 'told you clearly.' Does that mean you actually saw the culprit's face!?"

"Of course I did!" she said, looking me straight in the eye. "Long black hair—"

*For the record, my hair is long, but it’s auburn.*

"A pitch-black mantle—"

*Well, almost every sorcerer wears one of those...*

"And wearing a ram’s skull as a crown..."

*Never heard of him. I wear a bandana.*

"He was a huge man—"

"...Wait a second, sister." I looked at her with a deadpan stare.

"Now that you mention it..." She stared back at me. "You don't look much like him at all!"

"What were you thinking!? WHAT!?"

"Lots of things..." she said nonchalantly.

I put my head in my hands. "Gaaaah! First that pacifist old man from a while back, and now you... why is it that only people like this gather around me!?"

"Birds of a feather—"

"Shut up! ...Good grief. Anyway! Now you see that I’m not the one who killed your brother, right?"

"...I guess. Sorry." She apologized surprisingly easily.

---

"Now that I think about it..."

Having been freed from the spell and the ropes, she sat on the edge of the bed—which creaked every time she moved—and rubbed her wrists.

"I saw a sorcerer wearing a ram’s skull in this town. Just yesterday."

"In this town!?"

"Yeah. I thought he looked suspicious, so I asked his name, but he said his name was Laun... something-or-other. I figured I had the wrong person. But looking back, he was definitely suspicious."

*You don't need "looking back" to realize that guy is suspicious!* I wanted to scream.

Especially that "ram’s skull"! What on earth is that about!? Usually, the only people who wear things like that are evil high priests from legends. It’s like he’s screaming, *"I AM SUSPICIOUS!!"* at the top of his lungs.

"Anyway," I said, clutching my aching head. "We’ll look for him tomorrow. Let's just sleep for tonight."

"Alright."

But... I was careless. I hadn't realized that I'd already been dragged into this mess.

...Don't laugh.

---

The next day, we found the man easily.

We walked around asking if anyone had seen "a weirdo wearing a sheep skull," and the second person we asked gave us an answer.

"Looks like you'll finally be able to avenge your brother. By the way... what was your name again?"

I asked as we walked down a dusty road lined with white stone houses. Things were so chaotic yesterday I'd forgotten to ask.

"Canny."

She casually held out her right hand. ...*Wait, is she not a professional warrior?* I wondered as I shook it. Even a novice warrior doesn't usually offer their dominant hand so freely to a stranger... she must really trust me.

I use the slogan "Sorceress and Warrior," but since I lean more toward being a sorceress, I don't have much of a problem with the act of shaking hands.

"There he is! That's him!" Canny suddenly shouted.

I saw the man in question turning a corner ahead.

"Let's go!"

Before I could say anything, she was already running. "Wait! You, the weirdo!"

He stopped and looked back at her voice, so he must have some self-awareness. He looked to be in his early thirties. He was definitely a weirdo, but he was a slender, fairly handsome guy with a black beard.

"Are you speaking to me?"

"...Is there anyone else in this town weirder than you?" I said, catching up a moment later.

The man made a face.

"More importantly, you!" Canny pointed a finger at him. "You're Lina Inverse, aren't

you!?"

*THUD!*

I did a spectacular face-plant. This girl... she doesn't think at all!

"No... my name is Dilus..."

"Oh... so I have the wrong person... maybe!?"

"Are you an idiot!? ...You fought this girl's brother six months ago, didn't you!?"

"In Volun Village to the north!" Canny added.

"Ho ho..." Under the ram's skull, his eyes narrowed. "I remember now. So, you're that girl. I didn't recognize you in that warrior's outfit."

"It *was* you!" Canny said. *Wait, what happened to "the wrong person"!?*

"How diligent of you to follow my words and come for revenge. You could have lived a long life if you'd just stayed quiet and cried yourself to sleep... To think you'd defy me, Sart Blazer..."

"...Wait a second. Didn't you just call yourself Dilus?"

"Ridiculous!"

When I called him out, the evil sorcerer whose name I didn't know puffed out his chest. "No one in this world knows the true name of me, the sorcerer of a thousand aliases, Balph Luquas!"

*...I bet he's actually forgotten his own name.*

Honestly, I wish he wouldn't act so proud of something so stupid. It makes me feel pathetic for even taking him seriously. Not to mention the whispers from the crowd: *"Hey, it's those girls from yesterday," "How embarrassing, every single day..."*

"Whatever! Vengeance for my brother! Prepare yourself!"

Canny charged. The sorcerer moved!

*WHACK!*

The man's boot connected squarely with Canny's face as she charged in blindly.

The onlookers burst out laughing. I pretended I didn't know her. Canny kept trying her best anyway.

"Take that! And that!"

*Swing, swing! Kick! Tumble. Stomp stomp!*

"Waaaaah! Waaaaah!"

...Is she seriously going to come back crying? Normally...

"Be careful!" Canny said, suddenly becoming serious again. "He's strong!"

"No, *you're* just weak!"

"Don't say that!"

While we were bickering, the sorcerer forced a passing cart to stop. "Hey! Drive me around, I don't care where! Do as I say and I'll pay you later! Refuse, and I'll kill you where you stand!"

The terrified driver groaned and whipped the horse.

"Fuhahaha! If you want to defeat me, come and get me!" The sorcerer shouted as he stood triumphantly in the moving cart. It wasn't very cool.

"You're not getting away!" Canny started running, completely ignoring the gap in their abilities.

I followed her, chanting a spell under my breath. That sorcerer must have realized that even if Canny was a joke, her "helper"—me—was no pushover. Otherwise, he wouldn't have run. His plan was probably to lead us through town at a speed we could just barely keep up with, wear us out, and then finish us off.

Not a chance!

I grabbed Canny's hand. "Here we go!"

"...Huh?"

"Raywing!" (*Sho-Fu-Kai*)

And with that, the two of us took to the sky!

"Dogaaaaah!?" the sorcerer in the cart screamed. A commotion broke out among the pedestrians too.

Naturally. You don't often see a sorceress flying at high speed while holding hands with a warrior.

*Raywing* is a dying art that almost no one uses anymore. Compared to how difficult it

is to learn and control, it’s just not very practical. In an emergency—like falling from a height—you’re better off with *Levitation*, which is much slower but vastly easier to cast and control. And you won't find a sorcerer in any storybook who engages in high-speed dogfights with Griffons.

As for me, the reason I learned it was simple: I wanted to impress my sister back home.

It worked. I failed the control, and dove head-first into a pile of commercial groceries. I was forced to wash dishes for two days after that. It was incredibly depressing.

I hadn't used the spell since then, but...

"Blast it!" The sorcerer shouted at the driver to speed up.

"You're not getting away!" I increased my speed as well.

As a result, our altitude dropped. This spell creates a barrier of wind around the caster and moves that entire pocket; the weight it can carry, its altitude, and its speed are all proportional to the caster's power. Since I couldn't just drop Canny like "dead weight," increasing the speed meant the height had to suffer. Controlling our posture became difficult, too.

Now we were flying at about the height of an adult’s stomach. It was incredibly dangerous.

...Come to think of it, from behind my right hand—the one pulling Canny—I’d been hearing some pretty dramatic sounds like *"Thud! Screeeeeech!"* and *"Splat! Crunch!"* but I decided not to let it worry me.

*...I hope she’s still alive*.

---

"Curse you!"

The sorcerer fumbled around in his robe with his right hand while muttering an incantation. Since we were surrounded by a wind barrier, the wind wasn't howling in my ears, but it *was* howling around the barrier, making it just as hard to hear.

Judging by the rhythm of the chant, it wasn't an offensive spell. It seemed even the unnamed evil sorcerer wasn't reckless enough to fire off offensive magic in the middle of town.

The sorcerer scattered something onto the ground. Instantly, the earth swelled. Using

whatever he'd thrown as a core, it took on a massive human shape.

*A Mud Golem!?* He uses interesting techniques. He's trying to check me, betting that I can't use other spells while I'm controlling *Raywing*. If I don't slow down, we'll crash right into it.

But... *CRUNCH!* My spell shattered the Mud Golem.

"What!?" the sorcerer screamed in shock.

It's true that even I can't use an offensive spell that requires extreme concentration while controlling *Raywing*. However...

I can manage a bit of *Dill Brand*.

As the name implies, *Dill Brand* works by appealing to the earth spirits. To put it simply, it's a digging spell. I interfered with the earth spirits that were giving the golem its "temporary life" and had them open a hole right through its belly.

Of course, if that man's skill—his influence over the earth spirits—had surpassed mine, the result would have been different.

The true value of a sorcerer lies in their ability to adapt. Even a seemingly mediocre spell can have a massive effect depending on how it's used. You often hear of sorcerers who specialize in "ultra-powerful" offensive magic being defeated by someone who barely knows any; that's usually why.

"Tch!"

The sorcerer stopped the cart and jumped off. He must have decided that since he couldn't outrun me, he had no choice but a direct confrontation. The nearby fruit vendor and the old lady selling dried fish sensed the danger and fled.

But even if he'd decided to fight me, he was still Canny's brother's enemy.

"Canny! I'm going to let you fly!"

"Right!"

She understood my meaning instantly and gave a sharp reply.

Summoning my strength, I gained some altitude and headed straight for the sorcerer. Keeping her wrapped in a "wind" effect, I let go of her hand. I landed quietly on the ground, my mantle fluttering like a black bird.

Canny kept flying, spear leveled, like a released arrow. Straight toward the sorcerer!

"Brother’s vengeance! Prepare yourself!"

In that split second, the sorcerer simply stepped to the side.

*Oh, right!* I forgot that "dodging" was an option!

"Kipyaaaaaah!" Canny screamed.

*Stay calm! Hang in there, Canny! Change your course with sheer willpower!*

*CRASH-SPLAAAT!!*

...Yeah, I guess that was asking too much.

She slammed head-first into a pile of fruit, leaving only her lower half sticking out from the oranges.

I glared at the sorcerer. "How could you do something so horrible!?"

"You're the one who did it!"

"The past is in the past! Anyway!"

Dismissing all the complicated problems with a single "anyway," I said: "Looks like I’ll have to be the one to avenge Canny and her brother!"

I expected him to charge in shouting, *"Don't just kill off my comrades!"* but instead, he started chanting a spell.

This chant was... **Fireball**!

A small ball of light that explodes on impact, scattering flames everywhere—an offensive spell for indiscriminate mass slaughter. It can easily roast a human to medium-rare.

*Are you insane!?* If he used that here, the townspeople would be caught in it too. I thought for a moment about trying to persuade him, but decided against it. I saw the look of madness in his eyes.

*I guess I have to take him down.*

I started my own chant. A small smile played on the sorcerer’s lips. He’d realized what spell I was using.

**Dug Haut**, the spell that was the basis for *Explosion Array*. It causes the earth in a circular area around a certain point—usually the caster—to erupt upward with explosive force. It’s like firing clods of earth from below.

Compared to Fireball, it’s easier to control and the casting time is much shorter. However, as an offensive spell, it’s second-rate at best. If someone is wearing a sturdy robe, they won't die even from a direct hit. It’s mostly used for harassment or to sap the fighting strength of someone you don't want to kill. Even the magical barrier that protects a caster during an incantation can almost completely nullify its power.

Naturally, being a sorceress with peerless magical power, I have plenty of spells in stock that can easily block a Fireball with their casting barrier. But if I used one of those, the whole town would be blown away.

*Clap!* The sorcerer brought his hands together in front of his chest. He slowly spread them apart, and a glowing ball of light appeared between his palms.

"Here it comes! Fireball!"

"Dug Haut!"

The ball of light was released. Almost simultaneously, the earth erupted in a circle around the sorcerer.

A pillar of debris shot toward the sky, obscuring the sorcerer from view. An explosion, then a scream... the pillar of earth was dyed crimson.

The crowd gasped.

That was the end of the evil sorcerer whose real name we never did find out. I had his Fireball collide with the erupting earth, causing it to detonate inside the "tube" created by the Dug Haut.

"Victory!" I gave a V-sign to the empty air.

"—It’s over... finally..."

Startled by the voice right in my ear, I spun around. Canny was standing there with a distant look in her eyes; I don't know when she’d recovered.

"Brother... I have officially fulfilled your vengeance..."

"You didn't do a single thing!"

"Ah! Don't say that!"

---

"I'm sorry... you’ve done so much for me..."

Canny, who had come to the edge of town to see me off, held out her right hand. When she first did that, I thought it was strange, but it was nothing. She was just a

total amateur. Now she had sold off her weapons and armor and was wearing a very ordinary tunic. It actually suited her better.

I gave a wry smile and shook her hand. I'd worked for absolutely nothing this time, but once in a while is fine. If I think of it as doing a good deed for society...

"What will you do now?" I asked. She gave a bright smile.

"I'm going back home to till the fields again. With my younger brothers."

I gave a small smile. "That kind of life might be nice too. Well then, take care."

"You too."

My mantle fluttered in the breeze. I suddenly had a thought. "This is none of my business, but... why exactly did that guy kill your brother?"

"Oh..." She gave a lonely smile and looked into the distance. "That night, my brother got drunk, and with a club, he hit that guy from behind as he was passing by..."

"W-wait a second!" I quickly cut her off. "I... I think I'd rather not hear the rest of that story..."

She looked puzzled.

*Gaaaaah! Don't tell me it was just a case of resentment from a sore loser! ...No! A sorcerer dressed like that couldn't possibly be anything but a villain! After all, he was going to fire off a Fireball in the middle of town! He was definitely a villain! Yeah, that must be it! I've decided! Right now!*

"...What are you worrying about all by yourself?"

"N-nothing! Nothing at all!"

"Well then—take care, Lina."

"Yeah, you too... ha, haha... well, see ya!"

With a forced smile, I hurried away from that town.

*The world is a deep place...*

---

**Lina Inverse's Note:**

Don't judge things by appearances alone.

# (THE END)

# The Scary Thing About Rumors

Black shadows danced in the darkness.

The men rushed toward the bed all at once. Several blades, coated in black, were raised high—

"Fire Arrow!"

At my command, several arrows of flame manifested before the men's eyes. The assassins froze.

"GO!"

The conflict was over in an instant.

That’s what happens when you underestimate me—Lina Inverse, the sorceress and warrior. Just because you’ve launched a night attack doesn't mean you can let your guard down.

Sure, if you’re attacking an opponent lying in bed, you could probably defeat a warrior much stronger than yourself. Just imagine how much dexterity it takes to counterattack with a sword from a horizontal position.

However—it’s a different story if your opponent is a sorceress. Unless it’s an incredibly powerful spell, chanting an incantation while lying down is perfectly easy.

That’s exactly the trick I just used on these assassins. The moment I woke up sensing bloodlust outside the door, I began my chant.

But... for them to move this quickly... Elena-san in the next room is in danger too!

I sprang up, threw on my mantle, grabbed my sword and gear, and burst into the hallway. Standing right there was a man dressed in black. From Elena-san’s room came the clashing sound of steel on steel.

"Take this and run!" I suddenly shouted, lightly tossing my sheathed sword toward the assassin.

"Huh...!?"

With a pathetic voice, he reflexively caught it. And then—

The very next moment, as I brushed past him, my knee strike connected squarely with

the man's solar plexus. As the "Mr. Assassin" collapsed, I naturally took my sword back.

If you're going to launch a preemptive strike, it's effective to dull the opponent's judgment, even for a split second. Even if they know you're an enemy, if you shout something like that, they'll reflexively catch whatever is thrown at them.

I burst into Elena-san's room. Thank goodness, she was safe. I don't know how she managed it, but she was performing the miracle of parrying the swords of two assassins while still sitting on her bed. It's not a sight you see every day.

*Maybe I should watch a little longer...*

The thought crossed my mind for a second, but I couldn't actually do that. She is, after all, my employer.

"Lightning!"

I channeled electricity through my drawn sword and slashed at the men. Normally, a mere graze would be far from fatal, but the two assassins collapsed instantly.

"Thanks, Lina-chan!"

"Never mind that, hurry! Pack your bags! We're leaving this inn!"

The doors to both her room and mine had been unlocked perfectly. Either there was a skilled thief among the killers, or someone working at this inn was one of their accomplices. Regardless, staying here wasn't a smart move.

The two of us sprinted down the hallway. Huddled in the dining area that served as the lobby were about a dozen men in black.

"Close your eyes!" I shouted to Elena-san. Without waiting for an answer, I began to chant.

"Light!"

Closing my eyes, I released my mana. If you suppress the brightness of a *Lighting* spell, you can increase its duration. The reverse is also true. What I did just now was fire off three "zero-duration" *Lighting* spells in rapid succession!

The assassins screamed. The overwhelming flash of light scorched their eyes.

As the light faded, we slipped past the blinded, stumbling killers and ran out the front door. Perhaps they hadn't expected us to break through the front, because there was no one lying in wait.

We ran through the main street as dawn approached. It wasn't until we reached the

coast that we finally caught our breath. The lighthouse light went out, and the horizon was dyed crimson.

Morning broke over the port town of Raulua.

"Look!"

Elena-san's voice pulled my heart back to reality just as I was admiring the sunrise. Looking where she pointed, I was struck speechless.

In the middle of town, flames were rising. It was right where our inn was.

*Zugegegegegegege!*

Ah... aaaaah! W-was that *Fire Arrow* a bad idea after all...? I have to follow up!

"What horrible people!" I shouted. "To go as far as setting the inn on fire!"

Perfect! Now everything is the fault of the "Dark Wolf" gang!

---

This job was the destruction of the bandit group known as "Dark Wolf." The reward wasn't particularly high, but I took the job for two humanitarian reasons.

1. I love beating the stuffing out of villains without mercy.
2. I cannot forgive a cliché name like "Dark Wolf." Even in those old, unfashionable folk songs, you won't find a name that lacks that much taste!

...Looking back at the list, I get the feeling it's not very "humanitarian," but you can't become a great person if you worry about small details.

Anyway, I arrived in this town where their headquarters is located yesterday at noon, accompanied by my client, Elena-san. Since we didn't know exactly where the base was, we started gathering information immediately... and that night, we ended up targeted by assassins. It seems there are more of their associates lurking in this town than I thought.

My client, Elena-san, was a woman in her early twenties with beautiful black hair and a face that somehow reminded me of my sister back home. The longsword at her hip didn't quite match her aura, but she was actually quite a skilled user.

While it's true there's some story behind someone hiring a mercenary to wipe out a bandit gang on their own, I didn't dare ask the reason. Humans usually have one or two things they don't want to be asked about. If she wants me to hear it, she'll tell me herself.

"But... we have to settle this quickly—"

I swallowed the words that were about to come out. *I wonder how many more inns will turn to ash before this is over.* I couldn't say that in front of her.

The sun had emerged more than halfway from the horizon, and a slightly cold sea breeze blew in on the morning light. It was only then that I realized: I was trying to look cool in a mantle thrown over my baggy polka-dot pajamas.

---

"Wow, what a beautiful day!"

I shouted loudly on purpose as I strode down the town's main street. In contrast, Elena-san was looking around with a deadly serious expression, staying on guard.

It was a diversionary tactic. I openly resumed gathering information about the Dark Wolf headquarters. As long as I was doing that, the enemy would have no choice but to move, even if they knew it was a trap. The plan was to catch whatever assassins they sent and make them spit out the location of the base.

A young sorceress in a black mantle (who had, for the record, changed out of her pajamas) and a female swordswoman clutching a longsword, looking suspiciously at everything. This bizarre pair was bound to attract attention. It wouldn't be long before they reacted.

However—

"Hey there! Is this your first time in this town?"

A different reaction came from a different place. Two young men with skin tanned by the sea and sun suddenly called out to us. They probably thought we were just some country girls visiting the big city. I wasn't in the mood to be hit on, but I decided to use this for some "publicity."

"Yes! It’s our first time here, so we’re totally lost!" I shouted in a purposefully airheaded voice, striking a shallow "pretty girl" pose.

"Heh, then we’ll show you around. Follow us."

"Thanks! That’s so helpful! We were really stuck because we couldn't find the 'Dark Wolf' hideout!"

The moment I said it—everything froze.

The old man walking by, the lady selling flowers—everyone stopped talking and stiffened. The guy who had called out to us turned his tanned face a brilliant shade of

pale and backed away several steps.

"I... I don't know anything..." he finally squeezed out in a trembling voice. "I don't know a thing!"

The men ran away at full speed. The people nearby also scurried away quickly.

"Oh well. Lina-chan, everyone’s gone."

"Hmm... well, isn't that fine?"

Anyway, the publicity was done. Now it was just a matter of time. If we walked around a less crowded area for a while, they would definitely show up.

Yes, finally—the time had come where I could grandly use my favorite offensive spells! ...I feel like that’s slightly off-track, though.

---

A white stone path ran alongside the blue sea. The elegant houses lined up there were probably villas for some high-ranking officials. There were no people on the path under the afternoon sun. It was the perfect place for a aimless stroll.

Assuming, of course, there were no vulgar intruders. Like the group of five dressed in black who were currently blocking our way.

"I heard you were looking for the path to the Dark Wolf headquarters," one said. He seemed to be the leader of this assassin squad, though his face was hidden by a mask.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we are," I said with a smile. "If you know where it is, would you mind showing us the way?"

"...A shame," another said as all five drew their swords at once. "We do know the location... but the only place we, the five Zoles brothers, can guide you—is to hell."

Of course, if I were to suddenly fire off a *Fireball* or something right now, it would be over in a heartbeat, but then I wouldn't be able to find the base. It was a pain, but for now, I had to focus on disabling them.

"Let’s go!"

The men moved. Elena-san and I drew our swords. The assassins fanned out, forming a circle around the two of us. She and I stood back-to-back, swords ready in the center.

"Burn this into your eyes! Our brothers' secret technique: The Circular Dance of Death!"

The men began to run clockwise in a circle around us, staying just outside the reach

of our swords. At the center—if we moved, the circle drawn by the assassins' path moved with us. The men were gradually increasing their speed. With their similar builds and identical clothing, it created the illusion that they were afterimages. It would be difficult to predict where a sword would suddenly thrust out from.

However, I knew the perfect offensive spell for this situation. I began to chant a small incantation. But then—

"Ugh!"

One of the men in black suddenly let out a small groan and collapsed.

"What happened!?"

"Brother! Pull yourself together!"

The other four rushed to him. We just stood there, stunned, watching it unfold.

"It’s no use... he’s dead..."

"How!? Why!?"

"It’s... a heart attack..."

*Faceplant!* Elena-san and I both hit the ground hard.

"Hmm, come to think of it, Brother did have a weak heart..."

"Did he overexert himself for our big comeback?"

*D-don't be an assassin if you have a weak heart!*

"But Brother must have been so frustrated..."

I bet he was. The four rose slowly, turning their burning eyes toward us.

"...How dare you do that to him, you brats!"

"We didn't do anything!"

"Don't get cocky! Avenge our brother! Prepare yourselves!"

...I don't know what’s cocky or who’s being avenged, but one thing is for sure: it’s a mistake to try to have a logical conversation with people who believe they are the most righteous in the world.

The four brothers started running around in the same formation again. I wasn't going to put up with this anymore.

"Dyaaaaah! Mega Brand!" With Elena-san and me at the center, ripples raced across the earth in a spiral. The moment they touched the men, the ground beneath their feet erupted toward the sky with the force of a tidal wave.

The men caught in it didn't stand a chance. "Pyogeeeeh!"

Raising nonsensical screams, they were tossed into the air by the debris and fell to the ground after a few moments. I'd saved enough power that they wouldn't die, but their fighting strength should be gone. Now, that's one step done.

---

"So, you think we'll just talk?"

One of the men, tied up thoroughly with rope, said with a defiant smirk.

"I'll make you talk. Otherwise..." Elena-san's threat didn't work on the men. One of the others mocked her with a grin.

"Otherwise... what? Are you lovely ladies going to torture us? Nah, you won't. After all, you're the heroes of justice who came to defeat a bad bandit gang. You couldn't possibly do something like torture."

The four of them laughed in unison.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't misunderstand me," I said, scratching my head. "I don't know about her, but I, at least, am not something as grand as a 'hero of justice.' I'm simply an enemy of villains."

"Ha! You think dressing like a sorceress and acting tough will make us scared enough to blab? Little girl."

"Hmm..." I decided to change my approach and rely on my own fame. ...It's a move I don't like to use much... "Let me change the question. Have you guys heard the rumors about Lina Inverse?"

The men seemed confused by the sudden change in topic, but one answered.

"Yeah, just rumors. They say she's a female sorceress who has a vendetta against bandit gangs, and her methods are cold-blooded. Apparently, her family was killed by bandits long ago. They say she's just a young brat... who... is..."

The man's voice trailed off. A look of slight fear crossed his eyes as he looked at me. He must have realized what I was getting at.

...But it's true that rumors always grow tails. Who's family died when? As if *that* family would be weak enough to be killed by bandits! Still, there's no reason not to

use this misunderstanding.

"You look like him... the one who killed my brother..." I said coldly.

For the record, I never had a brother. I have a sister, though. But the bluff worked perfectly. All four men screamed at once.

"T-then you're actually the one..."

"The bandit-killer, Dra-Mata Lina!"

"W-wait! I'll talk! I'll tell you anything! Just don't use me as material for a Chimera!"

"I beg you! You can do whatever you want to me, but please don't touch my family! My wife and daughter have nothing to do with this!"

"Please! You over there! Stop her! Or else... or else..."

...Ugh, what a reputation. I wonder what kind of rumors about me are circulating among them... I don't really want to know. Am I an evil Great Demon King or something!?

"You should have been this honest from the start." It didn't feel great, but getting them to talk was the priority. I decided to keep up the act of the cold-blooded sorceress. "By the way... 'Robber's Killer' aside, what's this 'Dra-Mata'?"

"D-Dra..." The man I asked opened his mouth timidly. "The one so scary that even a **Dra**gon would **Mata**gi (step over) her and run away..."

*CRUNCH*. My elbow sank squarely into the top of the man's head.

---

"I see... I bet no one would ever think this is the entrance."

Elena-san and I were looking up at a towering white structure. The lighthouse on the cape.

If you open the entrance door, there's an inner wall, and between it and the outer wall is a spiral staircase leading to the observation deck. And inside that inner wall, there's apparently a path leading to the Dark Wolf's underground headquarters. A place that completely contradicts the image of a bandit base. Plus, it can be used as a watchtower to see the whole town at once.

"Now then—how about we just blow the whole lighthouse away with a flashy offensive spell and bury the whole gang alive...?"

"No—"

To my words, which were about 80% serious, she replied firmly in a quiet voice. She was still looking up at the heights of the lighthouse.

"I have to settle things with their boss—with my own hands—"

Yep, there's definitely a story here. I let out a small sigh. "Anyway—we have no choice but to charge in!"

---

Glowing moss planted all over the walls and ceiling dimly lit the long corridor. The cold, damp air smelled like rusted iron. According to the "Something-or-other Four Brothers" whose faces I'd covered in lewd graffiti before tossing them into the middle of town, this place was originally a storage area built into an underground cave. They apparently dug a tunnel from the basement of the lighthouse to connect it. Quite a lot of work.

"Hmm—?" Elena-san and I stopped at the exact same time.

"The air..."

"It's moving."

The two of us immediately began searching the walls. "Found it!" I shouted.

A part of the moss-covered wall had a black line in it. Just about the size of a door. Searching further, I found something like a toggle switch camouflaged near the floor. It lacked any originality, but it made things easier. When I flipped the switch, the door slowly recessed into the wall.

We hugged the walls on either side of the door, listening for any presence inside. I peeked in. It was a small room with a single door on the right wall.

"Doesn't look like anyone's here..." I said, stepping into the room. Elena-san followed behind me. "I don't know what kind of traps are set. Stay close and be careful."

The moment I said that—*Grumble*...

A dull sound. A part of the wall was slowly sliding out toward where I was. Normally, it would be a trap designed to crush an intruder, but either it was poorly made or it was just old, because you could walk past it without any trouble.

But at that moment! "Lina-chan, look out!"

Surprised by the mere fact that there was a trap, Elena-san lunged at me with a

full-force tackle.

"Wha— ouch!" I stumbled several steps.

*Snap!* Beneath my feet, a pitfall opened wide.

"Oh my."

Looking at Elena-san, who was striking a "pretty girl" pose with her hand to her mouth, I fell into the abyss.

"—Don't 'oh my' me! You total airhead!!" My scream vanished into the darkness.

---

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

Contrary to most expectations, I returned to the front line without falling into any real danger, just as Elena-san was in the middle of fighting off some slimes acting as guard dogs.

"Lina-chan! You're safe!?"

"Of course!" I gave a grin and a wink.

Swords are useless against slimes. However, she must have had some kind of magic powder. The moment the countless slimes touched the powder she was scattering, they scurried away in a panic. It was working perfectly.

"That's amazing... but what kind of medicine is that?"

"Salt," she said simply.

...*Fade to black*.

"This is a port town. I bought a lot because it was cheap, and it happened to come in handy—what's wrong, Lina-chan?"

At her comment that overturned the whole concept of slimes, I was huddled on the ground with my head in my hands.

---

"Irresistible momentum"—those were the words for us right now. Punching, kicking, and knocking down the rows of bandits, scattering destruction and slaughter as she goes—today too, goes Lina Inverse!

...Because I'm always acting with that kind of energy, those extreme rumors start behind my back. I am aware of it. But my motto is: "Be aware, but never reflect!"

That aside, the time had finally come to checkmate the "Dark Wolf" bandit group. In front of a large set of double doors, the tension reached its peak.

"—This is the room." Elena-san nodded silently at my confirmation.

"I'm opening it."

"Before that—Lina-chan, I want to remind you once more. I will defeat their leader. Please, do not interfere."

"—I know." I slowly pushed the door open. It swung inward more easily than I'd expected.

---

"...So you've come..."

In a spacious, unexpectedly bleak room, a man was waiting alone. He was tall with blonde hair, and though it's a cliché, he had a supple yet ferocious air that reminded me of a tiger. The scimitar he held unsheathed glowed with a faint light.

"—We meet again, Tis."

"...Eh...?" At Elena-san's words, I reflexively looked at her.

"...It really is you... when I heard a woman was snooping around, I wondered if it might be you..." The man called Tis gave a strange smile.

*...Umm, if possible, I'd prefer it if you didn't just carry on the conversation between the two of you...*

"I couldn't have said you were a good, honest boy even back then... but I never thought you'd become someone who would sit back as a bandit leader."

I noticed the sadness hidden behind the anger in Elena-san's words.

"Why would you do this...?"

"It's just how things turned out. I was the leader of the bratty kids, living freely as an outlaw—and before I knew it, I'd been set up as the head of a bandit gang. Well, once things are this way, there's nothing to be done."

*...This guy has really been making light of the world...*

But now the picture was clear. A man and a woman who were childhood friends. But the man took the wrong path and was now a bandit chief. She had come to the man's side out of a sense of desperation. Not for persuasion, but to settle things with her

memories.

"Do you have no intention of going back to being an honest man?"

"...It’s too late for that now—" Tis gave a self-mocking smile.

Hearing the answer, Elena-san took a deep breath. "Then I have no choice—but to settle this..."

"...I suppose so..." As they spoke, the two of them charged at once. Two swords scattered sparks.

As she parried an overhead strike from Tis, Elena-san’s right leg swept out. Tis hopped back to dodge the sweep. As she followed up with a thrust, his scimitar deflected it. The battle went on and on.

While lightly taking care of the low-level bandits who occasionally showed up, I watched their fight. Their skills were almost equal. However, both of them lacked "edge" in their techniques. Hesitation was dulling their blades. They probably weren't aware of it themselves.

*Hmm. But this might still have a chance.*

Their skill was indeed equal. However, in terms of physical strength and stamina, Tis far surpassed her. With every clash of blades, little by little, power and speed were drained from Elena-san’s sword. Fatigue began to cloud her movements, and before long, she was forced entirely onto the defensive.

Sweat beaded on her forehead—her feet began to stumble—

*Clang!* The sword in her hand was sent flying. At the same time, she slipped and fell to the floor.

The match was over. Tis raised his scimitar high—and then his hand stopped. Enough time passed for a small hourglass to run out.

He must have realized. His true feelings. He couldn't kill her.

Very well.

"Alright, alright! That’s enough!" I clapped my hands. I saw Tis let out a sigh of relief as he turned his eyes toward me.

"In the end, even though you ended up here because of 'how things turned out,' you don't actually want to be a bandit boss, do you?"

"...I guess... doing stuff like this won't lead to a good death..." he said with a wry

smile. Elena-san, who had stood up, was just staring at us in a daze.

"Then just quit. Being a bandit boss."

"Don't make it sound so easy. Even if I say, 'I'm quitting now,' the world and my subordinates won't just say, 'Oh, okay.'"

I thumped my chest. "Don't worry. I'll handle it!"

"...How?"

Instead of an answer, I chanted a spell. "Elmekia Lance!" (*Ressen-sho*)

A lance of light born from the air pierced Tis's chest. "Gwah!" He was blown back and slammed into the wall, becoming motionless.

"Dyaaaaah! What are you doing to my Tis!?" Elena-san grabbed me by the collar and started shaking me violently.

"Guhyo— can't— breathe— Ele— san— stop—" I finally shook her hands off and coughed violently. ...Man, that was painful.

...She must have realized too. Her true feelings. She didn't want to lose him.

"He's not dead, he's not dead!" I said. "That was a spell called 'Elmekia Lance.' It takes the target's spiritual willpower and... anyway, never mind the complicated stuff. Tis-san is just temporarily weakened and unconscious. If *someone* takes care of him with all their heart, he'll be back on his feet in less than a month."

I spoke to her as she stood there with a puzzled look on her face.

"Listen closely. You came here to rescue your childhood friend who had been captured by the bandits. You saved him after he was about to be used as a body double for the boss, and I defeated the boss. He's weakened because he refused to cooperate with the bandits, and the angry boss didn't give him any food. —Let's go with that story. Tell Tis-san to follow along once he wakes up. Of course, some people will be suspicious, but when they are, tell them this: 'Do you really think Lina Inverse would show mercy to a bandit leader?'"

"—But, if the boss's body isn't found and a man who looks exactly like him is rescued and being cared for, anyone would see..."

To Elena-san, I said with confidence: "Hey, we just need to create a situation where it's not strange for the boss's body to be missing. Easy as pie."

"Suddenly, Dragon Slave!"

The mountainside exploded. Trees were blown away, and a massive crater opened in the earth. *—Let's take care of nature*. The resulting landslide swallowed every facility built into the underground cave.

Thus, the stronghold of the evil bandit gang, "Dark Wolf," was destroyed.

"So, Elena-san," I said to her as she stood by with Tis-san supported in her arms. "Be sure to tell Tis-san this when he wakes up. Tell him I said: 'If you ever do something stupid and trouble Elena-san again, I'll turn you to ash, right down to the last hair on your head.'"

"...When you say it, it has a strange amount of reality..." She gave a wry smile, then lowered her head with a serious face. "Lina-chan... thank you, really..."

"—Eh?" Her eyes were a little misty. ...When someone thanks me so formally, it's actually kind of embarrassing.

"...Oh, right, this." I quickly looked away and handed her a small leather pouch I'd taken from my mantle. It was filled with gold coins.

"—Eh...?" Elena-san's eyes went wide.

"It's a celebration. For 'the new start for the two of you.' Oh, I already deducted my final commission from that." I talked fast to hide my embarrassment.

"But... this is too much... No, you're losing money on this."

"It's fine, it's fine. I have plenty of money, despite how I look. And besides, taking care of someone for nearly a month will cost money. Just take it and smile."

She said nothing and lowered her head deeply once more. Hmm, I really am embarrassed.

---

The news of the Dark Wolf's destruction spread in an instant. It was in a small inn town about ten days away from Raulua that I heard the rest of the story in the rumors.

The town's lord, who had been too scared to move against the bandits before, had now started a massive hunt for the remnants, dug up their buried headquarters, and "confiscated" the treasure the bandits had hoarded.

However, only a fraction of the treasure was found; it seems most of the valuable items had gone missing, perhaps buried somewhere. Typical opportunists, but that's

how high-ranking people are.

I don't hear any rumors about the two of them. If the truth were found out, it would definitely be a big story people would talk about. Since those rumors aren't there—they must be doing well.

—But I bet Elena-san doesn't know. What I was doing and where I was between the time we got separated at the pitfall and when we met up again...

I spent my time in my room at the inn, reflecting on many things. While organizing the treasure I'd "borrowed" from the Dark Wolf's vault...

## (The Scary Thing About Rumors: End)

# Naga's Challenge

It’s a sudden story, as usual...

When I returned from dinner, I found my inn suddenly engulfed in flames.

"Hyaaaaaaaah!"

I stood there, screaming at the top of my lungs.

...This is no laughing matter! Inside those roaring flames was all of my luggage! And let me tell you, when I say "luggage," I don't mean just any old bags! Numerous magical items! Gemstones of all shapes and sizes! It wasn't just a small fortune; frankly, it was enough to buy a whole small town outright.

And now! That! That was...!

—Aaaaaah, I’ve suddenly become dirt poor!

The street was packed with a huge crowd. The bucket brigade of passersby and the "Extinguishing Slugs" fired by a few wandering sorcerers had almost no effect on the raging fire.

Then—

"There’s someone inside!" someone shouted. "There’s still someone in there!"

I turned my eyes toward the heart of the blaze. There—on a third-floor balcony not yet reached by the fire—she stood tall and defiant.

Long black hair. Slanted, deep eyes that held a certain intelligence; she was quite a beauty. However—

A small skull necklace hung from her neck! A flashy, skimpy costume that barely covered her chest and hips! And she was standing there letting a black mantle flutter in the heat haze!

It was what people called the "Evil Female Sorcerer Look," popular hundreds of years ago—the kind of outfit where you’d catch a cold a hundred percent of the time if it were winter.

What kind of fashion sense is that!? Seriously, this woman!

...I once met someone with a similar sense of style before, but...

*Glint!*

She turned her gaze toward the crowd—or rather, clearly toward me.

...Ugh, I have a bad feeling about this...

*Point!* She pointed a finger straight at me and shouted with a voice that rivaled the roaring flames.

"Lina Inverse!"

Aaaaaah! I knew it!

*Murmur, murmur...*

The crowd began to buzz.

"Who's she talking about? Hey, who is it?" I looked around frantically, trying to pretend I was just another bystander.

"It's you, you! Don't look around! You! That short sorceress girl over there with the brown hair and the black mantle!"

"Well, excuse me for being short!" I reflexively barked back. The eyes of the crowd focused on me instantly.

*Shieeee!* Dammit!

...Once it's come to this, I might as well just be defiant. I glared back at her head-on.

"What do you want!?"

"Good question! It means the legend of your 'Invincible Demon King' name ends today! By the hand of me—Naga the White Serpent!"

De... Demon King...

Who are you talking about!? Who on earth is that!?

Ah... the crowd is giving me such cold looks...

Actually, among sorcerers, my name is somewhat well-known. While leading a modest life of wiping out bandit gangs wherever I go to earn travel money, for some reason I don't quite understand, I've been labeled as a "vicious and peerless" individual...

But in this world, if a rumor starts that you're even remotely strong, some weirdo inevitably shows up saying, "I'll defeat you and make a name for myself!" I've actually fought several such people before.

So, I guess this Naga person is just one of those types...

"For starters, as a greeting, I've turned your luggage into ash along with this inn. Ho-ho-ho-ho! Well? How do you feel?"

"Ho-ho-hooo... so it was you..."

*Twitch.* The area near my temple began to throb.

"So that means I just have to take out my grudge for my luggage on you, right!?"

"If you think you can!"

"Alriiiiight! I accept that challenge! Now, come down here!"

The moment I said that—*Twitch, twitch!*

Her smile cramped up. She began looking around frantically, muttering something under her breath.

...I knew it. She didn't think about how to get down. You get people like that once in a while. People who only think about the dramatic effect and forget about what comes after.

"Kyaaaah! Somebody help meeee!" Naga screamed.

"Daaaaah! You idiot!"

Driven by rage, I fired a *Fire Arrow* that struck just below the balcony where Naga was scurrying back and forth. In an instant, the flames spread, and her figure vanished into the fire.

And that was the end of the mysterious woman who called herself "Naga the White Serpent."

"My dear luggage, I have avenged you." I made a V-sign toward the sky.

Then—at that moment. I felt a surge of bloodlust surrounding me!

"...Hey..."

One of the men who had surrounded me before I noticed stepped up with a menacing look.

Th-these people... don't tell me—

"What were you thinking, using a fire spell!? When we're working so hard to put it out!?"

It was the guys who had been fighting the fire!

"E-err... well..." I laughed and scratched my head. The men stared with sharp eyes.

—It seems that laughing it off isn't going to work this time.

In that case— "U-uhu... I'm sorry." I put my fists to my mouth and tried a "trembling" pose.

...Their gazes didn't change. I guess that wasn't the problem...

"A-aha... ahahahaha... Raywing!"

I used the high-speed flight spell to float above their heads and took off toward the west!

"Ah! She's running away!" someone shouted behind me.

Secret Technique: Evading Responsibility!

...Good kids shouldn't imitate this.

---

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! We meet again, Lina Inverse!"

I ran into "it" on a seaside road. The sea breeze tickled my nose pleasantly. The sun was warm and cozy. The season was already early summer. I was fine because I was casting a minor cooling spell inside my tightly closed mantle, but otherwise, it was warm enough to break a sweat.

In that weather, "it" was standing in the shade of a roadside tree, wrapped from head to toe in splints and bandages, barely supporting itself with two canes.

—Of course, I'm sure she didn't choose to look like that, but it's a fact that just looking at her made me feel hot.

I stopped, of course. Since she called my name and said "meet again," we must be acquaintances... but her face was wrapped in bandages too, so there was no way to recognize her. From the voice, she sounded like a woman, but—

"...Who were you again?"

—*Crashing waves*— The sound of the surf echoed in the distance.

"—Hmph..." After a short pause, she let out a small chuckle.

*Point!* She tried to point at me, lost her balance, and quickly stopped.

...Wait, this "dramatic effect first" behavioral pattern... I've seen it somewhere...

"You're good at playing dumb, little girl. Don't tell me you've forgotten! Your greatest and final rival, Naga the White Serpent!"

..... I tilted my head curiously.

"—Who was that again...?"

—*Rushing waves*— The sound of the surf echoed emptily.

---

Of course, I was joking.

Naga the White Serpent. It's hard to forget someone who got caught in a fire they started themselves. It's perfect material for a funny story to tell my sister when I go back home.

But—she was alive... I don't know how she managed to get ahead of me, but she certainly put in the effort.

—However, I don't remember making someone like *this* my lifelong rival!

Anyway, that joke seemed to be quite a shock to Naga. She froze solid and didn't move a muscle.

—This is interesting, so I'll watch for a while.

---

—Hah.

She finally snapped out of her frozen state after I had finished my slightly late lunch bento.

—It seemed like there were all sorts of complicated internal conflicts going on...

"A-at this point, whether you remember who I am or not doesn't matter! The point is whether I defeat you now and inherit the name of 'Invincible'—that is what truly has meaning!"

...I see, she reached a self-contained conclusion...

"Here I come!"

As she spoke, she began to chant a spell. This spell is— *Dynast Breath*!

—But wait, didn't that one... require gestures...?

For offensive spells up to the level of a *Fireball*, you don't necessarily need to strike a pose. In the Sorcerers' Association, they teach the gestures strictly, but those are to amplify the spell's power. If you're willing to accept a slight drop in destructive power, you can technically use them while lying in bed.

However, when it comes to powerful spells that aren't easily taught, it's a different story. Not all of them, but usually, some degree of gesturing is required. I think this spell was one of those...

*—O High King who sleeps at the bottom of the earth,*

*Owner of the frozen soul—*

Naga's chant stopped there. ...I knew it. It was the part where a pose was needed. She was desperately trying to raise her right arm, losing her balance halfway, and struggling hard.

—Ha... Hao... Haooo!

*Flop.* She suddenly flipped over.

*Flail, flail, flail.* She seemed to be doing all sorts of things, but the splints were in the way and she couldn't get up.

Her movement stopped. Hmm? After a bit, she started again— *Flail, flail, flail, flail!* Apparently, she had been taking a break.

...Just to be clear, I have absolutely no memory of making someone like this my lifelong rival!

*Stillness.* Naga's movement stopped again.

"...Lina-chan, help me..."

"Daaaaah! Don't make such a pathetic voice, you're a grown woman!"

Ugh... my head is starting to hurt... I could just leave her, but if she died of dehydration because she couldn't get up (...is she a cockroach?), I'd have a bad taste in my mouth later.

—Naga is indeed the enemy of my dear luggage, but I decided to forget about that. After putting about four bandit gangs out of commission since then, my pockets were a bit warmer and I'd relieved some stress, so I was feeling unusually broad-minded.

"...I guess I have no choice..."

I helped the struggling Naga up and gave her the canes so she could stand.

"Fu-fu-fu-fu..." Naga immediately let out a chuckle. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! You're still soft, Lina Inverse! To show mercy to an enemy!"

...Listen here, lady...

"This time for sure! I'll show you my true power!" She began chanting again. This time, it was a spell that didn't require gestures.

—But even if she says she'll "show her true power," I feel like I've already seen enough... mainly, her lack of depth...

*Trip*. I lightly swept her cane with my foot.

*Thud*. Naga fell down easily again.

—She has absolutely no awareness of the situation she's in.

*Flail, flail, flail*. She started struggling again in a panic.

...As a fellow sorceress, it's so pathetic it almost brings tears to my eyes.

*Whoooooosh*... The wind blew by. Naga's movement stopped.

"...Help me, Lina-chan..."

"I don't know you!"

I abandoned her as she continued to wail behind me and headed for the next town. I hoped that would be the last I saw of the self-proclaimed sorceress, Naga the White Serpent. Well, that's what I hoped...

---

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! We meet yet again! Lina Inverse!"

*Pffft!*

I sprayed the Panon Juice I'd bought at a stall all over the place.

"...How dirty..." Naga said, knitting her brows.

"Shut up! Who do you think is responsible for this!?"

Aaaaaah, I knew it, she's all better!

I had my unwanted third meeting with her about ten days later, in a certain city. On the main street in broad daylight, a woman in an over-exposed outfit was letting out an incredibly bizarre, high-pitched laugh. It wasn't hard to imagine what the passersby

were thinking.

"H-hey, you! Whatever, just don't talk to me looking like that in the middle of the day!" I whispered to her while blushing.

*“What kind of show is this?” “You look sexy, lady!” “Take it off!”*

Naga stood there with a faint smile, completely ignoring the various jeers from the crowd. ...Maybe she just didn't realize they were jeering at her...

"Oh my, are you scared? Little girl? You certainly did a number on me last time... but now that my wounds are fully healed, those dirty tricks won't work again!"

Ugh, I’ve had enough. I don't want to get involved. I felt like crying. Isn't there a decent enemy somewhere!? Fine! If it’s come to this, I just have to settle it once and for all and end this cursed connection with her!

...Though it’s a fact that I don't feel like fighting seriously...

"—Fine. I get it. Let’s settle this clearly."

"Hoh..." Naga’s eyes narrowed. True to her nickname, it was like the gaze of a snake. "...It seems you've finally made up your mind..."

I haven't made up anything.

The two of us faced off for a while. —This person is certainly dumber than a sea slug, but she seems to have a decent amount of magical capacity. The *Dynast Breath* she tried to use before isn't a spell just anyone can use. I shouldn't underestimate her.

Then—at that moment—the whispers of the onlookers reached my ears.

*“Hey, is that girl one of them too?”*

*“She’s so young... how tragic...”*

*“I wonder what kind of education she had...”*

..... I felt myself turning bright red.

Th-this is bad... I have no intention of losing in terms of skill, but she has a far greater advantage when it comes to a lack of shame.

"Th-the place is outside the city, at sunset today—how about those terms?" I said in a hurry. That way, not many people would gather, and even if Naga did something pathetic again, the eyes of the people... ugh, I still don't like it...

—But I suppose it’s much better than doing it here.

"Hmph," she snorted. "No matter what you say, it seems you're scared to fight me..."

In a way, fighting someone like this with a dead serious face is indeed scary...

"You’re probably planning to sneak away and escape anyway!"

—I did consider that for a second. But if I did, she’d obviously just chase me down again in a few days.

"As if it’ll go that well! Let’s settle this right here, right now!" As I spoke, I began chanting. —*Freeze Arrow!*

"Wait! Hey!"

"Shut up!"

Over a dozen arrows of cold air appeared in front of Naga. The crowd scattered in a panic. Screams and shouts mixed together as stalls were overturned and children began to cry. ...It really is a nuisance to the neighborhood.

This spell, the polar opposite of *Fire Arrow*, doesn't have the flashy look or pressure of fire, but it coats whatever it hits with intense cold. If it hits an arm or leg, they stop moving instantly. If it hits the body directly, it’s a full-body frostbite at best, and being frozen solid on the spot at worst.

There’s no time to chant a counter-spell! I drew my short sword and leaped across the ground.

"You won't get away!"

The *Freeze Arrows* were released. Most of them flew off in random directions, freezing the fruit at a stall or sticking into the ground and creating frost heaves. Even so, a few of them flew toward me. I parried the one I couldn't dodge with my sword. The arrow of cold shattered, turning into small bits of snow as it melted and vanished into the early summer air.

The cold traveled through the sword's hilt and into my palm. It was a good thing I had gloves and leather wrapped around the hilt, otherwise, the cold would have frozen my skin to the grip.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! What’s wrong, little girl! You won't get anywhere just running away!" Naga was getting into it, firing *Freeze Arrows* indiscriminately.

—This is no joke! It’s easy to counter with a fire-based spell, but it would definitely

involve the townspeople. I've had quite enough of the cold stares from when I first met Naga.

Hmm, this is bad. I guess I have no choice but to lure her to a place with fewer people...

Then— "Wha-!"

I slipped on some ice on the ground and fell flat on my face. Dammit! —One of Naga's arrows must have hit a puddle there and frozen it...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho. It seems your luck has finally run out." Triumphant, she approached with a leisurely stride.

—Perhaps because she was drunk on victory, Naga didn't notice the bloodlust rising around her at all.

—I have plenty of chances to escape, and it seems more interesting to watch how this turns out. I stayed on the ground and looked up at her.

"With this, as of today, the name of the strongest sorceress in the world will be rewritten. From Lina Inverse to this Na—"

*THWACK!*

"Peguuu!" With a strange cry, she fell to the ground.

The one who had suddenly bashed Naga's head from behind with a frozen watermelon was, of course, Victim A—the fruit stand owner whose merchandise had been frozen solid.

"What are you doing!?" she said, holding her head. Closing in on her were dozens of townspeople who had been affected by her spells.

"H-hyaaa..." Overwhelmed, Naga backed away while rubbing her head.

"That's our line!" the owner shouted, getting right in her face. "Turning our merchandise into that! How do you plan to make up for this!?" The group of victims surrounding her nodded in unison.

...This is a scary sight...

"But..." Naga made a pathetic voice.

"No 'buts'! You're going to work off this debt!"

"...But... I..." With a look like she was about to burst into tears, she glanced back at

me.

—I don't know you. I stood up and brushed the dust off my pants.

"—Thank you very much. I was in trouble because she was stalking me. —Well then, I'll be going." I said with a smile, and before anyone could argue, I turned and walked away.

"...Now! You're with us! Get to work! First—"

"Hyaaaaa! Have mercy!"

Hearing Naga's scream behind me, I quickly left the city. ...I'm sure she'll show up again, though...

---

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! We meet again, Naga the White Serpent! It seems the time has finally come to settle our battle!"

Round Four with Naga the White Serpent. As soon as I found her face, I was the one to say it this time. Naga stood there, mouth agape, her "finishing line" stolen.

This time, we were in a forest near a small village. Here, even if we had a bit of a scuffle, there was almost no chance of bothering anyone else.

"H-hmph." She finally recovered and snorted to put on a brave face. "That's right. That's what I wanted to say. You managed to escape all three times before, but it won't be that way this time!"

...Do people normally call that "escaping"...?

"...But did you pay back everything you broke in that city? You seemed to catch up quite quickly..." I said.

"Oh, that. Of course I paid it back. I bought some oranges, used my ice magic to freeze them, and sold them as sherbet. It was a huge hit!"

"Ho-ho-hooo, I see! So you used that trick!" I was genuinely impressed. "That certainly sounds like it would sell... hmm, you have a good eye for business!"

"Well, it wasn't much..." Naga blushed.

My family back home actually runs a business. Maybe because I had the merchant spirit drummed into me since I was little, my mind always tends to drift toward business.

"Hmm, I'll try that next time too. —Well then, if you think of any other new business

methods, let me know." I waved my hand and turned my back on her.

"Yeah, okay." Naga waved back.

..... Her smile cramped up.

"Wait a minute! That’s not it!"

Ah, she finally noticed.

"Hmph, as expected of Lina Inverse. I almost fell for it again."

"...'As expected' or not, I don't think normal people would fall for that..."

"Shut up! Regardless, the time for our showdown has come!"

*Sigh*... I let out a small breath.

"I guess so—then..." I slid my feet across the ground and took a light stance. "Shall we settle this 'showdown' of yours?"

"Ku..." Naga groaned slightly. She must have been overwhelmed by my "aura." But—at this point, neither of us could back down.

"Freeze Arrow!" Naga fired over a dozen arrows of cold air! Every single one of them flew off in random directions, deflected by the wind barrier I had cast. Her face cramped.

"Now then..." I gave a broad grin. "It’s my turn."

"Mega Brand!" (*Dill Brand*)

"Hyaaaa!" The burst of stone from directly below sent her flying into the air.

*Thud*. She fell flat on the ground. ...Oh, she’s not moving. —Did it end just like that? Maybe...

*Twitch*... Naga’s body trembled slightly. Oh, she’s still alive. She managed to lift her upper body and looked toward me.

"...Hmph... not bad, Lina... as expected of someone who calls themselves my rival... but you still have a long way to go!"

"Daaaaah! Don't say such sore loser comments while you’re wobbling! —In the first place, you're the one who called yourself my rival!"

"You never run out of things to say, do you!?"

"Look who’s talking!"

"Then how about this... Vibration Slug!" (*Vem Shell*)

"Not a chance! Raywing!"

Riding the wind, I flew through the trees. Naga sat on the ground, firing spells indiscriminately. If one of those hit you by mistake, a human body would be shattered easily. However, these were spells cast from an unnatural position. Even if she relied on numbers, there was no way they would hit. They just blew away the lush leaves and smashed the tree trunks.

...But in this state, I couldn't launch an attack either. Then—suddenly, Naga’s attack stopped.

"...Hmm?" I landed on the ground and peered through the bushes toward where Naga was. Of course, I stayed on guard. It could be a trap. It was entirely possible that as soon as I poked my head out, a rain of spells would fall.

And then—I saw her. She was pinned under a tree she had knocked down with her own spells.

---

"Hey, you alive?" I crouched down next to her. Oh, she’s twitching. I poked her, and she managed to lift her head.

"K... k..." Now barely clinging to life, she was muttering something in a voice like a mosquito’s buzz.

"...What are you trying to say?" I leaned my ear toward Naga’s mouth. She spoke in a low voice I could barely catch.

"T... today... I’ll... let you off... with this..."

I punched her in the head without a word.

---

"U-ungh..."

Naga regained consciousness on a white bed in a small herbalist’s house—the only one in the village.

"—Are you awake?" I asked, sitting in a chair nearby.

"...Lina...? Why...?" she asked with a puzzled look.

That’s only natural. The person who had been trying to take her life until she lost

consciousness had apparently saved her. Anyone would be confused. —Well, when I punched her in the heat of the moment, she stopped moving, so I panicked and brought her here... but I couldn't tell her that.

"...I lost to you... that's why I saved you..." I said in a solemn voice with a serious look.

"...Eh...?" Naga's expression was blank. "Lost...? You say...?"

"Yes—to your spirit, still trying to fight even after falling..." I used a line from a rival character in some old folk song. It would sound incredibly unnatural to anyone else, but she, who gets easily drunk on the situation, didn't notice.

"D-does that mean...?"

"Yes..." I nodded. "As of today, the name of the strongest sorceress belongs to you..."

"...Lina..." With strangely misty eyes, Naga reached out her right hand. I gripped it firmly.

—Fu-fu-fu. Now then...

---

"I've finally found you! Naga the White Serpent!"

I met her again just a few days after leaving that village. I had made sure she left the village first so I could follow her.

"Li... Lina!?" Surprised, Naga stood up from her chair at the restaurant. I gave a broad grin.

"The 'strongest' label you took from me—it's time I took it back! Now! Fight me!"

*Twitch.* Naga's face stiffened.

"W-wait! Because that was... I've had quite enough of that! That kind of thing!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho. No. More. Excuses!"

I pointed my middle finger at her. I'd always wanted to do this! The role of someone who doggedly chases someone else! That's why I went out of my way to say "I lost" in that situation, just to create a reason to chase her.

"Hyaaaa! Have mercy!"

She ran, and I chased. Now, let's have some fun teasing her!

**(The End of Naga's Challenge)**

# Elcia’s Castle

"Dago-deen!"

The single strike of the *Dragon Slave* I unleashed blew away the chalk-white castle standing by the lakeshore, along with Evil Sorcerer A, who had entrenched himself inside, and his legion of "The Living Dead."

—Hmph. An easy job.

"And that’s how it’s done!"

I turned around with an overbearing air of triumph and sent a wink to the group.

Prince Elcia, the knights, and *her* must have been stunned by my immense magical power. They just stood there, dazed, with their mouths hanging wide open. The Prince’s crown, which was already a bit too large, was sliding off his head.

I turned toward the spot where the castle once stood—now a collapsed cliffside where even the rubble had vanished into the depths of the lake—and struck a sharp V-sign!

"Ho-ho-ho! For the warrior-sorceress Lina Inverse, a feat like this is child's play! All's well that ends well! Victory!"

"What part of this is 'well,' you brat!?"

I was promptly kicked into the dirt from behind by Prince Elcia.

---

"Ugh! Why is the world built on such absurdity!? *Sniff!* I did my job perfectly!"

I slammed my large mug onto the table with a loud *thud!* after draining it in one go.

"Don't substitute the world's absurdity for your own lack of common sense."

The woman sitting across from me also finished her mug with a long gulp and set it down quietly on the table. Both of us ordered refills at the exact same time.

—For the record, I was drinking plain juice. Her mug, however, was filled with high-proof alcohol. Despite matching my pace, her complexion hadn't changed in the slightest.

"What do you mean, 'lack of common sense'?"

"In what part of your body does common sense even reside?"

"I don't think I need to hear that from someone dressed in an outfit that doesn't have a shred of common sense in it," I snapped, eyeing her excessively revealing costume.

"You certainly have a mouth on you, little girl."

"Well, unlike some people, my brain's nutrients didn't all migrate to my chest."

"Oh? Is it that I have breasts, or just that you're tragically lacking them?"

*Twitch*. My temple gave a small spasm.

"You're quite the talker yourself."

"...Ho-ho-ho-ho."

"...Fu-fu-fu-fu."

Our glares collided across the table. Unable to stand the incredibly tense atmosphere, another customer fled the shop as if escaping for their life. The shopkeeper held his head in his hands.

Unfortunately, I had ended up paired with her for this job, but I had known her since before this. Her name is **Naga the White Serpent**.

She claims to be my "greatest and most powerful rival of a lifetime." I do not acknowledge this. (I know, I'm being blunt.) The only person I view as a true rival is my older sister back home... though she probably doesn't even consider me worth her time.

In truth, I've fought Naga several times before, and there was even one instance where I admitted defeat. The current argument, however, was about this specific job.

About a month ago, a sorcerer leading a horde of undead attacked Lantus Castle—the residence of Prince Elcia, famous for its small but beautiful appearance.

—A typical incident. The castle had little military defense and fell easily. Prince Elcia managed to escape with his remaining knights and burned with passion to defeat the sorcerer, but their lack of military strength was an insurmountable wall. If he asked the King for help, he might get troops, but that would broadcast his incompetence to the whole country. If things went poorly, he could even lose his status as a Lord.

So, he happened to come across two sorceresses and asked them for help separately. Namely—me and Naga. Our job was to "defeat the undead legion and the sorcerer controlling them," but...

"In what world is blowing up the entire castle along with the enemy considered

'common sense'?"

"It’s efficient, isn't it!?" I puffed out my cheeks. "...Besides, Prince Elcia didn't say anything during the contract... like 'Don't blow up the whole castle'..."

"Nobody usually has to say that! That's a problem that comes *before* common sense!" she shouted, slamming her hands on the wooden table.

"Because of you, the Lord is furious! He’s saying he won't pay the fee until we 'procure a replacement castle'... This is a huge mess for me too! I heard there would be a partner for this job, but... if I’d known it was you, I wouldn't have taken it!"

"Me neither!"

Once again, the atmosphere turned toxic. I was the one to break it, letting out a long sigh and looking away from her.

"...Anyway, standing here won't change anything. The problem is this 'replacement castle.' We can't exactly build a new one from scratch... so we either find an unused old castle or snatch one that someone else is using..."

"Snatch... Listen to yourself..."

"If we take it from a villain, there’s no problem, right? Every country has laws that say 'Villains have no human rights.'"

"They do not. They definitely do not."

...Is that so? I don't think we need to recognize the rights of people who habitually ignore the rights of others... but regardless, arguing with her here wouldn't solve anything.

"—That said, I haven't heard of any convenient bandit gangs using an old castle as a base around here..."

"Oh, if that's the case, I have an idea."

"Really!?"

Naga gave a firm nod. "Though—the opponent isn't a bandit, but a sorcerer."

---

"It's here," Naga said, coming to a halt.

"...This is it...?" Prince Elcia asked, his voice filled with dissatisfaction as he supported his sliding crown with one hand. The accompanying knights didn't look happy either.

—Well, I suppose it’s understandable. In the mountains a short distance from town, shrouded in thick brush, stood a heavy, moss-covered black castle. As a villain's lair, it couldn't be better, but it was hardly a suitable residence for a Lord and his knights.

According to Naga, the sorcerer living here had conducted suspicious human experiments in a certain country ten years ago, became a wanted man, drifted to this land, and settled in. ...I don't know how she knows such things. She definitely has some information network I’m unaware of.

"To think that one who holds territory from the King and bears the title of Lord would live in such a castle..." Prince Elcia muttered to himself.

"Well... it definitely has a different vibe from your previous castle," I said. "But if we're looking for a usable castle within your territory, this is the only one. If you tell us 'I don't like it, build me a new one,' we're going to get actually angry."

"Mmm..." The Prince glanced at his knights. Their faces were clearly etched with discontent.

"Well... if there are no others, it can't be helped... If we renovate it, it might look decent enough..." he said, adjusting his crown and sounding as if he were trying to convince himself.

I gave a firm nod. "Then it’s settled. Now, let’s go, Naga."

"Yes." She nodded and began walking side-by-side with me. Prince Elcia and the knights followed behind in a row.

Amidst the heavy scent of greenery, we stopped. Naturally, the castle had sentries. Five Skeleton Warriors and three Ghouls.

"...More undead..." Prince Elcia spat out from his hiding spot in the brush. "I really don't like those things. Zombies are half-rotten and smell in the summer, Ghouls are filthy, and Skeletons have no charm..."

Naga gave a sidelong glance of annoyance at the Prince, who had started muttering again. While I understood his dislike for undead monsters, having him constantly grumbling behind us was incredibly irritating.

---

As a side note, there’s a good reason why sorcerers use undead to guard their homes. If you think about it, the cost is practically zero. You can find corpses anywhere in a graveyard or on a battlefield. If you possess them with a low-level spirit or infest them with "Puppet Insects," you have a zombie ready to go.

Of course, they don't require food, maintenance, or labor costs. For the price of manufacturing alone, you can use them until the flesh rots off their bones and they stop moving (don't picture it). They do smell, though. Once they reach that point, you just possess the remaining bones with a spirit and use them as Skeleton Warriors. Truly a great deal—you can use them down to the bone!

The downside is that both zombies and skeletons are only capable of following very simple commands. If you mess up the instructions, they're useless. There's a famous story among sorcerers about a man who attacked a castle with over a hundred skeletons and ordered them to "Strike down everything that moves inside." As soon as they entered the gates, the skeletons started fighting each other and were wiped out without dealing any damage to the castle.

...That wasn't me, by the way. I'm not that stupid. To handle more flexible tasks, sorcerers keep Ghouls. If you feed them half-rotten zombies that have slowed down, they actually become quite loyal. —Though, it's not exactly something you'd be happy about having as a pet... I once visited a sorcerer's house where a Ghoul servant gave me a polite smile, and I almost reflexively blasted it with an attack spell.

"However... these sentries are a bit troublesome... If anything happens, the skeletons will counter-attack while the Ghouls go to call for reinforcements. ...What's our move?"

At Prince Elcia's question, Naga and I looked at each other and nodded simultaneously.

"As expected... now that we've formed a united front, there's only one strategy to take."

"That... one, right?" Naga said with a smirk.

Namely—**Brute force!** ...Though we couldn't bring ourselves to tell anyone else.

---

The Ghouls leveled their spears. The Skeleton Warriors slowly brought their swords to their chests. They were wary of the two women approaching from the front of the castle.

Namely, me and Naga. From the perspective of the skeletons, who had almost no judgment, I'm not sure, but to the Ghouls, it must have looked like two human women walking toward them while chatting. We were indeed smiling at each other as we walked, but we weren't discussing local gossip. We were quietly chanting attack spells.

"...Alright, about now."

"Right, let's go."

We both came to a halt and unleashed our spells at the exact same time.

"Fireball!"

"Freeze Arrow!"

...Wait? My reddish glowing sphere and Naga's bluish glowing sphere underwent some strange mutual interference before they even reached the sentries. As if pulling toward each other, their trajectories curved and they collided.

*Ping!* With a clear sound, both lights vanished.

"....."

"....."

We both froze. I see, so that's what happens when a fire spell and an ice spell collide in a weird way. —Wait, this isn't the time to be impressed!

"It's your fault for chanting a weird spell!" Naga shouted.

"What!? That's my line! Why would you chant an ice spell? It's so dreary!" I snapped back.

"What were you thinking!? In the summer, a cool ice spell is obviously better! It's not all about how flashy the spell is!"

"Stop it, you idiots!"

Along with the shout came Prince Elcia's kick from behind. *Wham*. Naga and I both fell flat, hitting our foreheads hard on the ground.

"Ow, ow, ow... what was that for...?"

"Don't 'ow, ow, ow' me! Do something about *them*!"

I looked toward the castle and saw that the Ghouls had already retreated inside, and five Skeleton Warriors were clattering toward us with their swords drawn. Right. This wasn't the time for a verbal spat. Naga and I faced the skeletons head-on.

"It's your fault for complaining," I muttered while facing forward.

"You were the one shouting."

I started to argue back, then changed my mind. "...Let's stop. The Lord's kick is going

to fly again."

"...Right."

We both started chanting.

"Vibration Slug!"

This time, our chants harmonized perfectly. Two of the skeletons were shattered in a single hit. However, the remaining three showed no sign of flinching (which is natural since they have no emotions) and continued their approach.

"Leave this to us!" Prince Elcia's knights shouted, rushing forward.

"Get back! It’s hard to defeat these things with swords!"

By the time I shouted, it was too late. The knights were already clashing blades with the enemy. One knight slashed a skeleton's head with a broadsword. The skull tilted at an unnatural angle for a second—and that was it. It snapped back into place like a spring, and the skeleton continued its attack as if nothing had happened.

"Uooooh! Our swords don't work!"

"It’s just like last time!"

Daaaaah! Do these knights not know the word "reflection"!? I felt like I understood why their previous castle had been taken so easily. But at this rate, if we used spells, the knights would get caught in the blast.

"Leave it to me!" Naga started chanting. ...I had a bad feeling she was planning to blow up the knights along with the enemy...

"Holy Bless!" (*Purification Flame / Flow Break*)

To my surprise, as soon as Naga finished her chant, crimson flames engulfed both the knights and the skeletons. The skeletons collapsed instantly. The knights screamed in shock.

"Uwaaaaa... wait? It's not hot?"

*Holy Bless*—a white magic technique used by high-ranking priests. It calms malice and hostility and repels low-level spirits with harmful intent. Naturally, it has no effect on the living knights. In fact, by removing the bloodlust and malice from the air, it made them feel refreshed and pleasant.

To think that she, dressed like an evil sorceress, could use such a spell...

"Not bad, Naga."

"Naturally." She gave a thumbs-up and a wink. Then—

"Don't scare us like that, you idiot!" Prince Elcia's kick exploded against Naga once more. ...He’s a short-tempered Lord. The knights must have a hard time.

"Sorceress! Look at that!" one of the knights shouted.

I looked and saw over a dozen Skeleton Warriors and zombies pouring out of the castle gate. Daaaah! This is annoying! I spread my arms wide while chanting and thrust my right hand toward the undead.

"Shadow Snap!" ("Hungry Dragon’s Bite")

My shadow on the ground stretched out in an unnatural, massive shape. —Or more accurately, a shadow in the shape of a massive dragon was born from within mine. It raced across the ground in a flash, opened its massive jaws, and bit into the shadows of the undead.

At that moment— *Crack. Snap.*

The skeletons' bones shattered and the zombies' flesh was gouged out. The exact parts of the undead that the dragon shadow bit into were destroyed in reality. Vivid fang marks were carved into one zombie's skin. Then, a rather unpleasant chewing sound followed. The group of undead was destroyed in no time.

"Withdraw, Shadow Dragon." At my command, my shadow returned to its original shape.

"You’re not bad yourself. That’s why you’re my rival," Naga said.

Like I said... I’m telling you, we aren't rivals...

---

The group stormed the castle's interior. After defeating the undead in front of the gate, we watched for a while, but there was no sign of movement. They probably realized that an outdoor battle would just waste their forces and decided to lure us inside to defeat us.

However! No matter what plan they devise, it’s impossible to defeat Lina Inverse! If it comes down to it, even if I have to blow up the whole castle along with the enemy... Wait, no. That’s a forbidden move this time.

Regardless—before our eyes was the castle’s Great Hall. On the opposite side was a staircase leading to the next floor. As soon as we entered the hall, the door under the

stairs opened and zombies began to emerge in droves.

Naga stepped forward, put her hands on her hips, and declared in a loud voice:

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Did you think a bunch of mediocre things like this could stand against Naga the White Serpent!? No matter how many you send, a mere ten or so zombies—"

*Clatter, clatter, clatter...*

"A mere twenty or so..."

*Clatter, clatter, clatter...* Uh oh.

"Thirty or forty..."

They kept coming.

"...Hmph." She gave a small chuckle, turned back to us, and patted my shoulder. "I'll leave this to you, Lina."

...What is *that* supposed to mean...?

Still, while they were "only" zombies, since I couldn't use powerful attack spells indiscriminately indoors, facing this many was definitely exhausting. If they rushed us with numbers while I was between chants, it would be no joke.

"Hmph... fine." I chanted a spell and thrust my right hand almost straight up.

"Vibration Slug!" (*Vem Shell*)

A part of the ceiling shattered and fell to the floor as rubble. I chanted the next spell and clung to Naga. It was a *Levitation* spell. Carrying Naga, I floated up into the air and called out to Prince Elcia below.

"Leave the enemies on the second floor and above to us!"

The Lord's face instantly changed color. "H-hey! Wait a minute! Isn't the normal line 'We'll leave you behind and go on ahead'!?"

"It is not." I stated firmly. If you state it firmly, you win. That's how the world works.

Ignoring the Prince, who was still shouting something, we proceeded to the second floor through the hole I'd made in the ceiling.

---

Fifth floor, the top floor. The sorcerer's room was there.

To be honest, we had quite a struggle getting there from the second floor. I had underestimated the situation, thinking that the zombies in the hall were the bulk of their forces, but boy, was I wrong. More and more zombies, ghouls, and skeletons kept coming out of nowhere. How did he manage to make so many undead? Didn't this sorcerer have anything better to do?

His goal was likely to exhaust our strength. It’s true—if we had honestly fought that many zombies, by the time we reached the master of the castle, the undead user, we probably wouldn't have had enough strength to produce even a single small spark.

We used the same method we used to break through the first floor: blowing through walls, breaking through ceilings, and somehow managing to bypass the hordes of undead to finally reach this point.

"Alright, then—"

"Let's go!"

Naga and I kicked the door open at the same time. In a dim, excessively vast space without even a light, were four large figures. We unleashed our spells simultaneously. I used *Fire Arrow*, and Naga used *Freeze Arrow*. We each targeted a different shadow. The spells hit, and the flames momentarily revealed the figures' shapes.

Rock Golems!

In that case, naturally, our spells had almost no effect. Simultaneously, in that brief flash of light, I caught sight of a figure sitting on a throne at the back of the room. That seemed to be the sorcerer in question.

For now, I had no intention of killing him. Even if I blasted the throne and took out the castle’s master, that wouldn't necessarily make the zombies who had already received orders settle down. We needed the evil sorcerer to cancel the orders he’d given to his undead, and more importantly, no matter how evil he was, just showing up on our own terms, going on a rampage, and then killing him would be a bit much.

...For those of you thinking, "Is it okay to beat up an evil bandit on your own terms without a word?" Yes, of course it is. (I stated it again.) Naturally, I had explained this to Naga as well. The key was how to make the opponent surrender...

"Lina! You draw the golems' attention! Leave this to me!" Naga said as she began chanting. She seemed to have a plan.

I fired a *Vibration Slug* at a golem that was stomping toward me. But with its large size and hard body, there was no way I could defeat it in one hit. My aim was the

golems' legs. For now, stopping their movement was the priority.

In the meantime, Naga’s chanting continued. —It seemed to be a summoning-type spell, but it was one I wasn't familiar with. Her fingers, joined in front of her chest, changed shape one after another, forming various signs. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

And then—her spell was complete.

"Dragon Blood!" ("Demon Dragon's Howl")

In response to the "Words of Power," it appeared!

The Demon Dragon—a dragon that is almost legendary, said to live only in the Katart Mountains where the "Demon King of the North," who rules over all the world's darkness, resides. Its black scales even swallow light, and its breath is said to scatter nothingness into the air. A golem wouldn't even be a consideration; even a Gold Dragon, known as the "Dragon King," would have to bow before its power.

Frankly, if someone summons one of these, your only options are to use a spell that borrows the Demon King's own power or to just try and run away. It truly is an invincible demon dragon. It’s a more than sufficient trump card to intimidate the opponent into surrendering.

—Assuming, of course, it’s summoned correctly.

I recognized Naga’s skill in summoning such a thing with just signs and a chant, without even drawing a summoning circle, but...

**WHAT ARE YOU DOING SUMMONING A DRAGON INSIDE A ROOM!?**

Pinned between the unexpectedly sturdy floor and ceiling, unable to move and just flapping its tail, it was nothing more than an "obstacle."

"Look at the situation before you use magic!"

"Shut up! Why don't you do it then!?"

"Fine! I’ll show you!"

I instantly formed a plan in my head. —However, I was concerned about the enemy sorcerer. Even after seeing our fighting, he remained sitting firmly on his throne without flinching. Does he have that much confidence, or is he just paralyzed with fear...? It was best to assume he was hiding a trump card...

Regardless, just thinking about it wouldn't start anything! I had to try!

"Vibration Slug!" My spell gouged the chest plate of one golem—the one whose legs I'd broken earlier. It was still supporting itself with its arms, but it seemed unable to move freely. From where I was standing, it was acting as a shield, and I couldn't see the sorcerer's throne.

I pointed sharply at that golem. "Naga! At my signal, fire a *Vibration Slug* at the exact same spot I just hit! Be precise!"

"Easy enough!" she replied with a smile.

I gave a firm nod and ran toward the golem. "Don't hit me!"

"Probably fine!" ...That "probably" is always very worrying when it comes to her...

Naga began her chant. And so did I. The golem, noticing me rushing straight at it, roared with a voice that sounded like the earth creaking. Its massive body loomed before me.

—Now!

I swung my right arm in a large circle. This was the signal to Naga. The golem, from an unnatural position, swung its right arm at me. It would be a fatal wound if it hit, but it was an extremely simple, large swing. I ducked to dodge it easily, moved into its guard, and placed my hands near its side.

It was simultaneous. Naga's *Vibration Slug* hit and shattered the golem's chest with perfect aim—and I unleashed the spell I'd finished chanting.

"Burst Rondo!"

Originally, this is a spell to blow stone fragments straight up. This time, however, I changed the way I used it. The moment the golem was shattered by her spell and turned into rubble, my spell blew those fragments straight back!

Namely—toward the throne where the sorcerer sat. And then I kicked off the floor again, riding the flow of the flying stone fragments. If these stones didn't incapacitate him, I would settle it myself in close combat. No matter who the opponent is, it's almost impossible to completely read someone's movements under these conditions. On the other hand, I just needed to graze his jaw with a punch. That alone would easily cause a concussion and definitely knock him out.

The throne loomed closer. Whether he didn't want to dodge or couldn't, the figure sitting there still showed no sign of moving.

"I've got you!" I readied my fist near my chest—

"Whoa! Ack-ack-ack-ack!" I scrambled to hit the brakes.

---

"Cheers!"

Naga and I were celebrating at a town tavern with the reward we'd received from Prince Elcia. Of course, she was drinking heavy alcohol and I was drinking juice. We both drained our mugs in one go and asked for refills at the exact same time.

I immediately started on the food lined up on the table. "...But that was a weird job."

"Yeah," Naga nodded while biting into some chicken. "Who were we even fighting...?"

I stopped with a piece of mutton halfway to my mouth and put it back on the plate, remembering the figure on the throne in that castle. What was there was the already-rotting corpse of a single sorcerer. He had probably been struck by some disease.

It's obvious when you think about it, but living constantly with half-rotten undead isn't good for your health. Maybe he caught some strange disease from a zombie he made. Although he became unable to move from illness, he couldn't exactly order a zombie, ghoul, or skeleton to go out and buy medicine. It must have been a rather tragic end.

To all you evil sorcerers out there! It's not good to fill your lair with only undead. Even if it costs a bit more, it's better to hire some living people.

...The undead and ghouls created by the sorcerer couldn't even understand that their master had died; they were just faithfully carrying out the orders they'd been given previously.

After the "showdown" at the throne, we defeated the remaining golems, Naga withdrew the dragon, and we retreated outside the castle for a bit. After consulting with Prince Elcia, who had already sneakily escaped, it took about ten days to exterminate the undead in the castle. And today was the handover. Thus, we successfully received the promised reward from the Lord.

"...But Prince Elcia seemed really happy," I said, and she nodded.

"He's a hot-tempered, eccentric middle-aged guy, but when someone is that happy, it doesn't feel bad."

"Yeah. I'm sure right about now..."

The tavern door was kicked open. Naga and I turned our eyes toward it in a hurry. There stood the legendary Prince Elcia. His eyes were bloodshot, and he was

breathing heavily. He didn't even try to fix his crown, which was on the verge of sliding off.

"P-Prince Elcia..." We both caught our breath at the terrifying atmosphere.

"H-how is it? How’s the comfort of your new castle?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood. The Lord responded with a grim smile.

"Oh... it was extremely comfortable... until it collapsed just moments ago."

.....

"WHAT!?" Naga and I shouted in unison.

"I-it had deteriorated significantly..."

"P-probably... no, definitely."

"Yes! And because *some people* made large holes everywhere with magic for no reason... it must have become quite brittle..."

We both shared a look of pure panic.

"...Let's run."

"...Let's run."

We both bolted at the same time.

"Wait! Don't run!"

And so, once again today, Prince Elcia’s kick flew.

## (Elcia's Castle: End)

# Villain Fight!

"Don't move!"

A sudden roar made Lina stop dead in her tracks. A man had a small girl dressed as a priestess in a chokehold from behind, pressing the blade of a broadsword against her throat.

"Don't move! If you value her life, stay quiet!"

"Tch..." Lina gritted her teeth.

"Let me go! I said let go!" the girl shouted, struggling in the man's arms. "You! Do you think you'll be forgiven for doing this to a member of the clergy?! Let me go this instant or I'll drag your soul down to hell!"

"Shut up! Is that any way for a priest to talk?!"

"Being a priest has nothing to do with this! I tried to be nice and persuade you, and you ignored me! Fine! I'll make sure you regret it! Lina-san!" She turned her eyes to Lina, who was gripping her sword and looking for an opening. "Listen! I don't care what happens to you, just save me!"

*Pfft!*

Lina and the man burst out laughing simultaneously.

"You... are you really a priest?" The man looked at the girl in his arms with utter shock.

"I'm a human before I'm a priest. Naturally, I love myself the most," she declared from the bottom of her heart.

"Ufufu... ufufufufu..."

Suddenly, Lina began to laugh. Sensing something incredibly ominous in that laughter, the girl and the man watched her warily.

"You're absolutely right, Meena-san. I'm just a human before I'm your hired bodyguard, so naturally, I love myself the most, too."

"Wait! Wait a minute, Lina-san! Don't be hasty! Humans need to help each other! The spirit of philanthropy and self-sacrifice is essential!"

Lina wasn't listening to her frantic excuses. "Don't worry. I won't kill you."

As she spoke, she began to chant a spell.

"Wait! STOOOOP! Don't you care what happens to the hostage?!" Meena's desperate screams were answered by a rain of offensive magic.

---

Eventually, the sun sets over the wilderness. Lina stands atop a cliff, arms crossed for no particular reason. Her black cloak flutters in the wind, and at her feet lies Meena, covered in bandages from head to toe, looking like a caterpillar.

Without warning, a narration begins to play:

> *And so, the evil criminal syndicate 'Hellmaster' crumbled before the exploits of Lina Inverse. But as long as evil exists in this world, a second or third Hellmaster will surely appear. Don't give up, Lina! Fight, Lina! Until the day you crush the world's evil with love, courage, and truth!*

A quiet BGM melody begins to play, and production staff names scroll across a giant crystal screen. The venue is engulfed in a storm of applause.

The hall, now bright, is packed with about dozens of strange-looking men. Even if they look like ordinary citizens, their aura is different.

"Ah, that was marvelous."

"Especially that last scene where the client, Meena, screams for her to strike down the leader regardless of her own safety... I found myself moved to tears despite my age."

"...Was there a scene like that?"

**"DAMN IT! STOP APPLAUDING!"**

The one shouting while slamming his fist into the crystal panel was the burly red-haired man who had been holding the sword to Meena's throat in the video—**Galls Blazer**, the former leader of the criminal syndicate Hellmaster.

The room went silent. A hanging sign reading *"38th Periodic Assembly of the Coastal Nations Criminal Syndicate Union"* creaked as it swayed from the ceiling.

"Listen up, you lot! The theme today isn't 'Fun Movie Night!' This is a counter-strategy meeting against that wicked sorceress who has become a threat to our Connections!

Take this seriously!"

"You say that, but..." a white-haired old man said with a look of pure exhaustion. He, too, was a boss of some syndicate. "She's peerlessly powerful, has no discretion, and doesn't hold back even if you take a hostage. If we face her head-on, we won't survive. I think it's wiser to treat her like an earthquake or a typhoon and just wait for her to pass..."

"I agree. Sorry, Galls, but hey, you're still young. It's not too late to start over. Work hard and rebuild your Connection. As for this time... well, it's tragic, but just think of it as being bitten by a stray dog and forget the whole thing."

"What kind of consolation is that?! You guys say that because it's someone else's problem, but do you have any idea how much blood and sweat I put into building that Connection?! Enduring the cold treatment of my foster parents, I seized their fortune without a word of complaint. Rain or shine, I tended to the Karon flowers every single day... When they finally bore fruit and I made my first batch of top-grade narcotics, I wept with joy! From then on, I worked steadily at prostitution, theft, extortion, robbery... I finally thought I could relax and let my underlings do the work while I played... and then THIS happened! It's too cruel!"

Galls' incredibly selfish trip down memory lane somehow filled the hall with the sound of sympathetic sobbing.

"Sniff... that's so moving..."

"I was like that as a child, too..."

"Then the choice is simple."

A voice rang out—clear, yet hiding a strong will. **Duran Balzac**—the young ruler of the Duos Connection, with black hair and sharp, hawk-like eyes. He was the moderator for this meeting.

"Regardless, we cannot let this slide. Our reputation is at stake. If we let her get away with this, who's to say a second or third Lina Inverse won't be born? One way or another, we must bury that girl."

"And how do we do that?" Galls asked. "She isn't moved by hostages, but what if those hostages were her own kin?"

"Well, actually—" Duran spoke hesitantly, hands behind his back. "Apparently, an organization in Sairraag once had the same idea and sent several skilled subordinates to her hometown to assassinate her."

"And?"

"Not a single subordinate returned. When they contacted the local underworld to ask about her family, the only response was 'No comment.'"

"...What kind of supernatural family is that?"

"In the end, that organization was crushed by Lina, and she's still alive today. Besides, sending someone to Zephilia now wouldn't be in time. So—Galls. Do you have the will to take revenge with your own hands?"

"Of course." Galls nodded firmly.

In truth, he didn't want to do it at all, but in front of all the local bosses, he couldn't exactly say, *"No thanks, she scaring the hell out of me."*

Duran nodded with satisfaction. "Then it's settled. You're the only one among us who has fought her. We will leave the planning of the 'Lina Inverse Assassination Plot' to Galls. Each Connection will provide him with aid proportional to their size. How does that sound?"

The attendees reluctantly agreed. They didn't want to help Galls, but they feared that if they opposed it, the task would fall on them. And so, on this day, Galls Blazer drew the shortest straw of his life.

---

"So? What are you going to do, Lina-san?" Meena asked with flat eyes in the dining hall of a small seaside inn.

"What do you mean 'what'?" Lina asked nonchalantly while slurping bayo-shark stew.

"The other day, you dragged me right into it and crushed an entire organization," Meena said resentfully.

Lina made a face. "...Are you still holding a grudge? About me blowing you and that man away with a spell?"

"Of course! I've been recording that moment in my diary with illustrations, and I read it aloud to myself every night before bed!"

"....." *She's dark*, Lina thought.

"Want to see it? The diary."

"No! I'm good! I've seen it enough times!" Lina quickly stopped Meena as she started rummaging through her bag.

The text, full of spiteful grudges, was hard enough to stomach, but the "illustrations" were worse. Lina had nearly fainted the first time she saw a crudely drawn, horrific creature that looked like a giant poisonous caterpillar with a tiny caption underneath that read *"Lina-san."*

"Anyway," Meena leaned in, her long golden hair swaying. "The organizations around here have a weirdly strong sense of solidarity. They've even formed a union."

"And...?"

"So! There's a chance the organizations in this area might team up for revenge! What are you going to do if that happens?!"

"Meena-san—" Lina looked at her seriously. "In life, there are always a few things, big or small, that you simply cannot avoid. This trouble with the organization is just one of those things."

"How does a simple job of guarding me to Roll City *inevitably* lead to trouble with a criminal syndicate?!"

"In that situation, there was no other way. You have to understand." Lina grabbed Meena's hand and squeezed it. If her other hand hadn't been clutching a fried crab claw, it might have been more persuasive.

"You kicked a random thug who spoke to you and robbed him of his valuables without a word! How is that 'no other way'?!"

"Well... I just skipped the middle steps. It would have ended that way regardless..."

The thugs she flattened turned out to be low-level grunts for the organization, and one thing led to another until the bosses got involved.

"Besides, looking back at the past won't improve the situation..."

"Why are you acting like this is someone else's fault?! This is all because of you!" Meena suddenly reached across the table, grabbed Lina by the collar, and began shaking her back and forth violently.

"Wa... wait... Meena-san..."

"Do you know how rare it is to get a mission from the temple?! I finally got lucky! I wanted to escape that twisted, sexless, closed society and pretend to be a normal girl! I wanted to trick men into buying me things and get dead drunk and complain about life! I wanted to do normal girl things! AND YOU! YOU!!!"

"Whatever... just... let... go..." Lina's head was spinning.

"Now I can't even relax! I had so many things I wanted to do! Go to the gambling halls! Eat delicious food! Soak in hot springs!"

While the other customers stared, Meena continued to howl and shake the now-dizzy Lina.

---

Duran was hesitating. To move, or not to move?

Thanks to the meeting, Galls had received a massive amount of supplies. He now had enough weaponry to wage war against a small nation. However—

"...Galls Blazer... can he really defeat Lina Inverse?" he muttered to himself.

It wasn't that he doubted Galls' skill. Galls was one of the strongest bosses in the region. But the opponent was the problem. According to rumors, Lina Inverse was actually several hundred years old and could spam spells powerful enough to pulverize giant castles.

There were other rumors: that the Chaos Dragon Gaav—one of the five subordinates of the Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu—had taken human form to hunt souls and would turn into a giant dragon if damaged (lol). Or that Lina was actually a Great Mage from the Kingdom of Lethidius that perished 500 years ago; she was dead, but a black bandana possessed by her lingering will was controlling her body (give me a break...).

All of them were "highly credible" rumors.

Duran had no particular loyalty to Galls, but the "Lina Inverse Forecast" released yesterday showed she would soon pass near his headquarters. If he left it alone, Galls might finish her off, but that hope was slim. If a confrontation was inevitable, it would be better to team up with Galls and hit her with everything. Then again, if he stayed quiet, she might just pass by without noticing his organization.

He wanted the method that hurt his own pockets the least. Fight, or play dead? It was a fateful choice.

---

The pale blue light of the full moon illuminated the pier. Only the sound of the waves ruled the night. No one knew that an entire block of warehouses belonged to the Syndicate Union except the owners themselves.

Galls was in one of those warehouses. It was filled with supplies sent by other organizations. Twenty catapults for siege warfare. No matter how great a mage she

was, could she possibly dodge countless giant stones flying from afar? Seventy suits of plate mail—with an equal number of war horses elsewhere. Spears, javelins, swords for hundreds of men. Rations enough to feed a town for half a month.

If he made a meticulous plan and used these resources to their full extent, burying Lina Inverse wouldn't be impossible.

"Perfect..." But as Galls whispered this, his face was shadowed with fatigue. "...If only I had the personnel, that is."

Looking at the moon through the skylight, Galls felt oddly lonely. It was a weary summer night for the twenty-seven-year-old Galls Blazer.

**Plan 1:** Disguise as a traveler, ask Lina Inverse for directions, and attack when she lets her guard down.

*Note:* She's seen my face before, so I need a mask.

*Flaw:* Asking for directions while wearing a mask is way too suspicious. High chance of being found out.

**Plan 2:** Wait for Lina Inverse to fall asleep and set fire to the inn.

*Flaw:* She'll probably just escape with magic. Also, this is Duran's territory; a massive fire would be bad.

**Plan 3:** Actually, she's scary, so let's not touch her. Apologize to everyone later.

*Flaw:* An apology won't fix this.

"GAHHH! No, no, no!" Galls scattered the pile of papers containing various plans. Under the dim light of a lamp, quill in hand, he tried to motivate himself.

As he wrote the plans, he had grown increasingly timid. Plan 1 was still "How to Defeat Lina Inverse Alone," but by Plan 10, it had become "How to Live Out a Quiet Retirement." He had caught himself seriously calculating the cost of a farm near Atlas or Crimson.

"No! I can't defeat Lina Inverse like this!" He was starting to realize that "defeating her" wasn't even the issue anymore, but he promised himself not to say that out loud.

"Calm down, Galls. Think. If she chants a spell, it's over. So it has to be a surprise attack... but damn it, if she were a normal, slow mage, I could just hit her with a crossbow while she's mumbling, but that woman has skills as a warrior too..."

He muttered to himself to organize his thoughts. As the moon tilted and the sky began to turn white, his strategy was decided.

"Alright!" He looked at the mountain of supplies. "I'll sell these and hire people!"

...A whole night of thinking, and this was the result. One could say his fate was sealed at this very moment.

---

"Hey friend, do you hate making money?" Gotton approached a man in a run-down tavern. It was a dark, sickly place that catered to wandering mercenaries and fixers.

"Are you talking to me?" The man turned toward him. He had an unusual appearance, but that only added to his aura.

"Do you know the name Duran-san?"

"The boss who rules this area, I hear."

"That's right." Gotton sat down next to him with a familiar smile.

In the end, Galls had only asked Duran for help in gathering people—with Galls covering all the costs. They were looking for wandering mages. *Mage vs. Mage*—it was a simple, clear-cut idea.

"By the way, how skilled are you in the magical arts?"

"Heh... in the ways of sorcery, none can match this Zelgadiss."

"Oh? That's impressive." Gotton lowered his voice. "We want someone taken care of. This much for the down payment. This much more if the target is finished." Beneath the table, he held up his fingers.

"I see... quite a sweet deal. Is the opponent tough?"

"A mage... someone who crossed the organization. To be honest, other assassins have been hired too. If they finish her before you, the money goes to them."

"Understood... the target?"

"A young girl." Gotton pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

"What?!" Agitation flashed across the mage's face as he opened the paper. It was, of course, a sketch of Lina Inverse.

"What's wrong? You know her?"

"Of course! That girl... she once forced this Garmuth Hannibal to taste the bitterness of humiliation!"

"Gar... Gal...?" Gotton frowned. "Didn't you just call yourself Zel-something?"

"My name doesn't matter! More importantly, I'll take this job!"

"Oh... okay. Here's the down payment then."

Gotton didn't care about the name. All that mattered was whether he could do the job. *Besides, it won't be hard to find him if something happens,* Gotton thought. You'd just have to ask around: *"Have you seen a mage wearing a ram's skull on his head?"*

---

"I don't like it," she said flatly.

"Hehe, boss lady, don't be like that... you won't find a sweet deal like this anywhere else." With a mix of flattery and lustful eyes, the man pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "This much money just for taking out one little girl. Eh?"

"I have a policy against that kind of work."

Frustrated that she wouldn't even take the paper, the man unfolded it and showed it to her. "Look, she doesn't seem that scary."

"Oh...?" Her eyes narrowed as they swept over the paper. "I see. She looks like a mere girl. It does seem like a sweet job."

The man didn't notice the thorns in her voice at all. "Right?"

"And this girl's name?"

The man's complexion changed at her casual question. "Well... her name is..."

"Hohohoho! If it's hard for you to say, I, **Naga the White Serpent**, will say it for you! This 'little girl' is Lina Inverse. A mage known by titles like 'The Bandit Killer.' Offering such a pittance of a reward to pick a fight with her... it certainly is a sweet deal. For you, at least."

"You... you know Lina Inverse?!"

"Hmph... I once fought her and, despite being seriously injured, forced her to admit defeat."

"WHAAAT?!" the man shouted. "I-is that true?!"

"Of course." She hadn't told the full truth, but she wasn't technically lying. Naga thought for a moment. "...If she's the opponent, that changes things. I might consider taking this job. Though, for that amount of money, it's out of the question."

"I... I understand..." Completely intimidated, the man stood up. "Then, please follow me."

With a small smile, Naga quietly stood up from her seat.

---

In the middle of a crowd, Lina stopped dead.

"Hey, why are you stopping in the middle of the road?!" Meena asked, ruining the atmosphere.

Lina remained silent, standing tall in the center of the street as if waiting for something.

"Listen..." Just as Meena was about to complain again—

"It's been a while, you two."

A familiar male voice. Sensing trouble, the crowd naturally parted, revealing the speaker. A man stood defiantly, glaring at Lina and Meena. He was within striking distance if he drew his sword and took a few steps. Red-haired, burly, with a longsword at his waist—Galls Blazer.

"Y-you!" Meena cried out.

"Do you know him?" Lina asked.

The wind blew quietly. After a moment, Galls finally spoke. "I won't let you say you've forgotten me, Lina Inverse!"

"Forget? I don't even know you!" Lina stated clearly.

Galls was speechless. She wasn't playing dumb. It wasn't a battle tactic to throw him off. She had, quite literally, completely forgotten him. To Lina, who had destroyed nearly a hundred bandit groups, the faces of bandits were irrelevant. In her head, they were categorized into three patterns: "Bearded," "Bald," and "Generic." It would

be more surprising if she *did* remember.

"Lina-san, Lina-san," Meena poked her. "Look, it's the boss of the organization you crushed recently. The one who held a sword to my neck before you blew us both away with a spell. I have it in my diary." Meena held a deep grudge.

Acknowledging the sarcasm but pretending not to notice, Lina said, "Well, I don't know the details, but I guess this is the guy."

"...You really don't remember?" Galls asked.

"Nope." Lina nodded.

He had carved the vow of revenge into his heart, only to find the target didn't even recognize his face. *He's being ignored...*

Shaking off his discouragement, Galls spoke his prepared lines. "I... I've come to warn you today!"

"A warning?" Lina frowned. This reaction was according to Galls' script, but...

"Yes. A warning. You were quite a 'help' to me the other day... hey... wait! Wait a minute!"

Ignoring his words entirely, Lina started walking straight toward Galls.

"Wait! Listen to—"

*BAM!*

And so, Galls' script required a major rewrite.

---

*This wasn't supposed to happen...* Galls thought vaguely as he lay tied up in the middle of a busy town street in broad daylight.

His plan was to announce that the Syndicate Union had hired mages to take Lina's life and then coolly walk away. Lina would then be on guard against mage attacks, unable to sleep, and eventually break down mentally...

He never expected to be flattened without a word.

"So? Since you called it a 'warning,' you were probably thinking of something rotten. What were you trying to say?"

"Heh... you want to know?"

"Wow, this guy is so arrogant," Meena said with an exasperated look, completely

ignoring her own personality.

Lina continued. "You want to tell me, don't you?"

"What if I say... I won't?"

"I'll use that." Lina pointed to the side of the road.

A small black mass was lying on the street—horse dung.

"ALRIGHT! My mistake! I'll tell you! I'll tell you everything!"

"So, what are you plotting?"

"T-the other day, there was a meeting of the organizations around here, and we decided to take you down no matter what! So we hired mages to attack you!"

Of course, he was the one in charge of the plan, but saying that now would be suicide.

"Why did you go out of your way to tell me that?"

"T-to show the world that this is the organization's retaliation!"

"Hmm..."

"Don't 'hmm' me!" Meena screamed hysterically. She grabbed the tied-up Galls by the shoulders and started shaking him again. "I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS! I was just dragged into Lina-san's trouble! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?! DO YOU!!!"

"Meena-san, calm down! Your shaking is actually quite effective!" Lina stopped her. Galls was barely conscious.

"Don't worry, Meena-san. We have a trump card."

"A... trump card?" Galls shook his head and smirked weakly. "Don't make me laugh. How can you counter a group of mages when you don't know when or where they'll attack?"

"Fufufun," Lina said with a truly delighted smile. "**H-o-s-t-a-g-e.**"

"....."

**"DAAAAMN IIIIIIIT!"** Galls' tragic cry echoed through the afternoon street.

---

"Gwahahaha! I've finally found you, girl! I have no personal grudge, but unfortunately, you'll die here—"

"Explosion Array!"

*BOOOOOM!*

"Alright, that's the second one today. Just like the first, no mercy, one spell in the middle of his speech—a truly demonic attack. So, Lina-san, what was the name of that spell?" Meena asked as she scribbled in her notebook.

"Explosion Array. Are you putting that in your diary too?" Lina asked with an exhausted expression.

"Decisive move: Explosion Array... yes, of course."

*Ugh... I hate this...* Lina thought. Now that Meena couldn't "let loose" properly, she was pouring all her repressed desires into that diary. That was fine, but every night at midnight, she would read it aloud by Lina's bedside. Lina had been having nightmares ever since. It was psychological torture.

"Well, let's hurry." Meena tucked her notebook away and tugged on the rope in her left hand. Galls was at the end of it, tied up like a mummy.

"You're a lucky man," Lina said to Galls. "If mediocre mages only attack sporadically like this, it's fine. Otherwise, you'd be used as a shield."

"Uuugh... what a mess... I'm a public laughingstock..."

"No, don't misunderstand. You're not 'like' a laughingstock; you *are* one. Have more self-awareness and confidence."

"Exactly. I'll make sure to record you in my diary, so walk with pride."

Encouraged (not really) by the nonsensical words of the two women, he reluctantly started walking.

"Halt."

A man's voice stopped them from behind. As Lina turned around, her face filled with shock.

"Y-you?!"

A man stood before them. A slender, handsome, black-bearded mage-type, but no matter how you looked at it, the ram's skull he was wearing on his head was bizarre. This was the same mage Lina had faced when she helped a girl find her brother's killer. But hadn't he died in a fireball back then?

Meena and Galls didn't know the history, but they watched in silence, struck by the

man's weird appearance.

"Girl, it's been a while," the mage said in a low voice, hatred burning in his eyes. "You really made a fool of this Xellos back then..."

"You're alive?!"

"Hah!" He flipped his black cloak for no reason. "Did you think you could defeat Graham Brandara, the mage of a thousand aliases, with a mere fireball like that?!"

Meena frowned at the different name in her notes, but she didn't have the courage to question it.

"A 'mere' fireball? That was YOUR OWN fireball!" Lina shouted.

"Hmph, you still have a big mouth! Don't you know I'm bad at fireballs?"

"Why are you bragging about that?! ...So? You want to settle things from back then, right?"

"Quite perceptive. Then this will be quick!"

"Wait. We can't be firing off spells in the middle of town in broad daylight. Listen up!" Lina held up one finger. "Come to the town pier at sunset today! Got it? Be there!"

The two locked eyes. "...Heh... very well..." The 'Thousand Alias' man smirked and turned on his heel. "Prepare yourself, girl." He disappeared into the crowd.

"Wow... that was cool, Lina-san!" Meena squealed. "I'm moved! My blood is finally pumping! I'll be there to witness the sunset battle too. Yes! This is the kind of excitement I wanted!"

Lina sighed and put a hand on Meena's shoulder. "Meena-san, listen..."

"I know. It's not a game. For you, it's a battle for your life, and having someone watch for fun—"

"I never said I was going."

".....Huh?" Meena's eyes went wide.

"I told *him* to go to the pier. I never said I'd be waiting or that we'd settle things."

Meena and Galls looked at each other. "B-but... normally..."

"If someone says that, you'd think—"

"I'm not going, and that's that! If I dealt with every guy like him, I'd never have enough

time!" Lina started walking away.

"WAIT! What's that supposed to mean?! I finally found some entertainment, and you won't fight?! What kind of—" Complaining and tugging on Galls' rope, Meena had no choice but to follow Lina.

---

"WE MEET AGAIN, GIRL!" The mage stood before them again the next day. They were on a coastal road. In the distance, children were playing on the beach.

"What's wrong? Your face is red," Lina said.

"SHUT UP!" The mage turned even redder. "Because you didn't show up, the onlookers threw trash at me and I caught a cold! You'll pay dearly for making a fool of Vine Streiser!"

He began chanting.

"Get back, Meena-san!" Lina shouted. The spell 'Thousand Alias' was chanting was one Lina didn't recognize at all. She began her own chant.

Lina finished a split second faster. "Raywing!"

The spear of light should have dealt a decisive blow to the target's spirit, knocking him out easily. But—

A black shadow stood before 'Thousand Alias' like a shield. The Raywing hit the shadow, which dissolved and collapsed. But there wasn't just one. Ten, maybe twenty doll-like shadows rose from the ground.

"See that, girl!" 'Thousand Alias' cheered.

"Earth Golems!" Lina shouted and began her next spell. "Dill Brand!"

It was a type of dispel. If Lina's magical capacity was greater than his, the interference of the earth spirits would vanish, and the dolls would crumble. But—

With a sound like grinding earth or a groan of resentment, the shadows continued toward her.

*No way?!* Lina was shaken. She had destroyed his makeshift mud dolls with a similar spell before. Why didn't it work this time?

She quickly chanted her next spell. In reality, the spell 'Thousand Alias' used wasn't a golem spell—it was a method of creating living corpses. Usually, zombies are made by parasites or possessing spirits, but he was using the latter—on soil. He made spirits

believe the soil was their own body. His fireball was pathetic, but his skill as a necromancer was top-tier.

"Dug Wave!"

The shockwave of blue light crushed several dolls, but it didn't reach the mage. The soft, unstable soil absorbed the impact. Worse, the crushed dolls immediately began reforming.

*This is endless!* She grabbed Galls by the collar. "You! What was your name again?!"

"G-Galls Blazer!"

"Right. Meena-san, let go of his rope!" Lina put Galls in a chokehold from behind.

Galls smirked. "Don't bother! It's useless to use me as a shield!"

"Here we go! New finishing move: **Galls Crush!**"

Lina chanted. Galls felt a chill. 'Thousand Alias' smiled, certain of victory. Meena was scribbling notes.

"Raywing!

Wrapped in a wind barrier, Lina and Galls hovered in the air. They accelerated toward the dolls!

"Ugyaaaaahhh!" Galls finally realized he was being used as a literal shield.

*Bash! Crunch! Thwack!*

The wind barrier and Galls' body pulverized the dolls, and finally, Galls collided head-on with 'Thousand Alias'!

---

Lina landed on the ground. Galls was a battered mess at her feet, twitching. He didn't seem happy about having a move named after him. The mage was knocked out, and the dolls turned back into plain soil.

Meena ran over, notebook in hand. Lina drew her short sword and pressed it to the mage's throat as he woke up.

"Looks like I win."

The mage turned his head away bitterly.

"That was amazing, Lina-san! I've never seen that before. I drew an illustration in my

notes. Want to see?"

"No..." Lina looked away from the notebook. The drawing looked like a lesser demon wrapped in toilet paper.

"L... Lina...?" the mage groaned. "Are you... Lina Inverse?!"

"You're just realizing that...?" Actually, she had never told him her name.

"Tch..." He gnashed his teeth. "Damn it... if I had known that, I would have apologized from the start!"

*He has no spine,* Lina thought.

"Whatever. So you don't want to fight anymore?"

"Fight? Actually, my wife is a huge fan of yours..."

"You have a wife?!" Lina blurted out. (*Poor woman... wait, maybe they have similar tastes...*) The thought of Naga flashed through her mind. "By any chance, does your wife wear revealing clothes, a skull necklace, and spiked shoulder guards?"

"Don't speak of my wife as a weirdo. She doesn't dress like that," he said, sounding offended. He had no right to judge others' fashion, but he seemed unaware of that.

Blushing slightly, he pulled out parchment and a pen. "She told me to get an autograph if I ever ran into you on my travels. Please."

"Uh... sure... 'Lina Inverse'..."

"My wife's name is Millienne. And today's date, please."

"Right, right... 'To Millienne-san'... and..."

"Maybe a favorite quote...?"

"'Villains have no human rights'... how's that?"

'Thousand Alias' gazed at the autograph with satisfaction and tucked it away. "Thank you." He turned to leave.

"U-uh, yeah... say hi to your wife..." Lina watched him go, stunned.

"Wow, you're pretty famous," Meena said, impressed.

"Yeah... I guess..." Lina didn't look happy.

"But wait. Didn't he just trick you and escape?"

Lina flinched. "O-of course not!" she laughed nervously.

"Hmm... wait, where is he?"

"Who?"

"He's gone!" Meena looked around. Galls, who was supposed to be tied up, was nowhere to be found.

"He must have escaped while I was signing the autograph."

Meena put her hands on Lina's shoulders from behind. Lina turned around to find Meena looking at her with cold, flat eyes.

"Don't 'he must have escaped' meeee!"

"Meena-san, calm dow—"

"HOW COULD YOU LET HIM GO?! How are you going to avoid the assassins now that our hostage is gone?! ANSWER ME! ANSWER MEEEEE!"

Meena continued to shake Lina until she completely blacked out.

---

"Galls! You're safe!" Duran greeted him with a weak smile at the headquarters of the Duos Connection.

"It was a nightmare... I was a total laughingstock for days. My reputation is in the gutter..."

"Now, don't be so down." Duran patted his shoulder. This wasn't friendship; it was calculation. Galls' territory was now a vacuum. A mobster who was made a fool of by Lina Inverse couldn't make a comeback. Duran wanted to be in Galls' good graces so he could have a say in how the territory was divided.

Galls saw right through him, but he didn't care. Revenge was all that mattered.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're back. That female mage, Naga, said she wanted to talk about the plan to take down Lina. I can tell her to wait if you're tired."

"No—let's do it now. Call her."

Galls waited on the sofa. Naga entered the room. "Hohohoho! You made it back, Galls-san. I want to discuss the assassination plan."

"Let's hear it."

"I want to get in touch with every mage hired to defeat Lina immediately."

"Fine." Galls nodded. The list was in his safe. "And what's the plan?"

Naga smirked.

---

"What a beautiful day," Lina stretched. They were walking through a seaside forest.

"No one has attacked since yesterday. Peace is the best, even if it's boring for my diary," Meena said. "Maybe they gave up?"

"I doubt it," Lina sighed. "That man, Galls, will definitely try something. People like him have too much pride. They never forget a humiliation."

As she spoke, a loud laughter echoed! "Hohohoho! Found you at last, Lina Inverse!"

"Ugh! That voice!" Naga appeared from the shadows.

"She's... she's here..." Lina said, looking miserable.

"L-Lina-san! What is that weird thing?!" Meena hid behind Lina.

"It's okay, Meena-san. She looks explosive, but she's human."

"I don't believe it! I'm putting this in my diary!" Meena started sketching Naga.

"You people... how can you say such things?!" Naga's face twitched. She turned to Lina. "Lina, I have some good news for you."

---

East of the coastal road was an old quarry. Lina reached the center, and suddenly—the air stirred. Mages hidden in the shadows began chanting simultaneously. Against this many, simple defense spells wouldn't work. Lina's only option was to fly—but she was swatted down by a wind barrier Naga had cast.

The first wave came: fire arrows from half the mages. Even if her wind barrier held, the second wave of fireballs would follow. The heat would knock her out, the barrier would fail, and she would be turned to ash.

Galls smirked, imagining Lina's end. *Perfect! Naga's plan is perfect!* He sat in a dark room, grinning to himself.

"B-boss... do something about that guy..." an underling begged Duran.

"Yeah... it's creepy. We just have to wait for Naga to return." Galls had wanted to see the end with his own eyes, but Naga told him, *"Do you want to become a hostage*

*again?*" so he stayed behind.

*BAM!*

A subordinate burst in. "Boss! It's terrible! Naga is..."

"Is she killed?!"

"No! She's coming here! With Lina Inverse!"

**"WHAAAAAT?!"**

The headquarters fell into a panic.

---

The building became a showcase for offensive spells. Lina and Naga blasted through everyone while Meena took notes.

"I wanted this excitement!" Meena cheered.

"Lina," Naga whispered. "Let's blow her away in the confusion."

"I already did that once. She'll read it to me every night..."

They ran into the man who hired Naga. "You! You betrayed us! What about the other mages?!"

"They all ran away when I told them their opponent was Lina Inverse," Naga laughed. Lina blew the man away with a spell.

They reached the top floor and found a secret passage behind a mirror. Naga kicked Meena down the dark hole. "GO!"

"KYAAAAAAAH!" Meena finally regretted following them.

---

Galls and Duran were running through a secret underground cave. They planned to escape and rebuild.

"How did they find this path?!" Duran cursed.

"Don't worry! There are traps! And I have a trump card!" Duran stopped at a giant cage. He opened it, revealing a horrific monster—a chimera. "Go, Vusebam! Tear them apart!"

The beast roared and charged toward Lina and Naga. Screams and explosions echoed from the tunnel.

*Wait!*

*Agh! It's so weak!*

*Is this thing out of shape?!*

*Duran, it's a total fraud!*

"RUN!" Duran and Galls started sprinting again.

---

Lina, Naga, and Meena (who had hit every single trap) emerged at a riverbank. They saw Galls and Duran trying to cross the river on floating logs.

Lina and Naga looked at each other and smirked. They both placed their hands on the water.

**"Sea Dragon!"** (Dill Brand)

The water rose like a tidal wave and swallowed the two men.

"We did it," Naga smiled gently at Lina. Lina blushed; she had never seen Naga smile like that before.

"Wait... where's Meena-san?"

"Maybe she got washed away...?"

"KYAAA! Find me!"

---

At sunset, Lina stood by the sea, arms crossed. A single drop of sweat rolled down her cheek. Behind her, Naga was giving Meena artificial respiration.

"Lina... we should have just left her at the cave entrance..."

"I was thinking the same thing..."

The narration began again:

> *And so, the Duos Connection fell. But as long as evil exists, a third or fourth will appear. Good luck, Lina! Fight, Naga! Until the day you crush evil with justice, love, and unity!*

The venue erupted in applause as the credits rolled.

"That was great!"

"The ending where Meena—"

**"STOP APPLAUDING! This time, we will truly punish Lina Inverse and Naga the White Serpent!"** Duran screamed next to the crystal screen. But everyone ignored him. No one wanted to be the next Duran.

The applause didn't stop.

## (Villain Fight: End)

# Afterword:

Lately, the world has been hit with a rapid succession of quite "dynamic" incidents. How is everyone holding up?

It's been a while! And thank you for waiting!

We hereby present to you *Slayers Special 1: The Prince of the White Magic City*!

The commentary is brought to you by me, **L**, who lulled the author to sleep with a little "something" in his drink and hijacked this afterword corner (and I'm not even sorry about it).

Since this is a short story collection, let's stick to tradition! Here is a breakdown of each story.

- **The Prince of the White Magic City:** This is, for all intents and purposes, the author's magazine debut work.
- **Revenger:** It's... *that* kind of story.
- **Robber's Killer:** It's... *that* sort of story.
- **Naga's Challenge:** You'll understand once you read it.
- **The Castle of Elcia:** It's... *this* kind of story.
- **Villain Fight!:** This is a newly written piece. It's not just a story where villains show up and punch each other for five minutes for no reason. Surprisingly, it's written in the **third person**.

...And there you go. I'm sure that gives you a perfectly clear outline of each work.

What's that?! You're saying even after I put my heart into that explanation, you still don't get it?!

How cruel! You're always like this! You never listen to a single word I say!

...Setting aside that nonsensical routine: Just try reading one of the stories. If it doesn't bother the bookstore staff, you can even just flip through it there. Even if the author doesn't forgive you, I will.

Now then.

Regarding the "Challenge to the Readers from L" corner—which is said to carry 90% of the main series' popularity—we'll be taking a break from it for the short story collections. However, the "**Portraits That May or May Not Look Like the Character**

**Contest"** announced in Volume 3 is still ongoing. The competition odds vary depending on the month you apply, so if you're lucky, you might win a "worthless prize" handmade by the author.

For the record, the first-place winners for March (which included February since there wasn't much time after the release) were: Yui Tamiki from Wakayama with "Zanaffar"; for April, Kazumi Kagura from Shizuoka with "Big Sister from Home"; and for May, Shoji Nakada from Nara with "Zolf's True Face." (By the way, I'm writing this in June).

From now on, we'll consider the shipping of prizes to be the official announcement of the winners. If you don't receive anything within two months of entering, please assume you didn't win.

A lot of people tried to "aim for the gaps" by sending in drawings of "The Author" or "An Actually Ugly L" (twitch). Entering with a curveball is fine if it's just one person, but when the numbers start adding up, it doesn't quite work.

Even though people are sending in things like the Chimeras created by Deimia or the weird bugs Lina used for fishing, there are still several characters who have actual names but have **never** been drawn—it's heartbreaking! Ahh! Please show some love to those characters who are being treated worse than strange insects! (lol)

Also, in Volume 3, the rule was "characters who have never been illustrated in *Dragon Magazine* or the Bunko novels, or weren't drawn clearly." However, since there are more people now who haven't read the early issues of *Dragon Magazine*, I'm changing the rule to: **"Characters who were not clearly (or not at all) illustrated in the Bunko novels."**

Oh, right. Someone sent in a drawing of **Subordinate S** along with the question: "Come to think of it, is this person a man or a woman?" Now that I think about it, I haven't mentioned that. Here is a comment from the person himself:

> *"...Me? Well, for now, I'm a man. One of the others was a man, and as for the other five, I don't know. They're all still playing dead."*

So, there you have it.

That basically gives away his identity, doesn't it?

However, since his "true form" looks exactly like something that has already been illustrated, if you're going to draw him, do the human version. By the way, he is currently frozen in his human form (looking to be around twenty years old).

So, here’s a question for you: **Who exactly is the person acting as his vessel?**

...If you use the process of elimination, it's quite simple.

Because it’s so easy, there will be no prize for getting it right.

There were suggestions from various places to print some of the best entries in the afterword, but since there were so many high-effort color pieces (or rather, because the black-and-white ones were almost all just jokes), we have no plans to do that for now. Sorry.

As for future prizes, the author seems to be considering "troublesome" items like:

- **"So What? Lord L Wind Chimes"**
- **"What Do I Do With This? Big Sister Masks"**

There was also a plan for a **"L-Branded Four Elemental Treasures"** series where you’d get one item per month. For "Wind" it would be a wind chime or a fan; for "Water" it would be a teacup or a mug. But then they realized for "Earth" the best they could do was a flowerpot, and for "Fire" they only had matches. They eventually gave up on the idea.

After all, no matter how you look at it, it’s just too sad if you put your heart and soul into a drawing, win first place, and all you get in the mail is a box of matches.

...Well, whether a wind chime or a mask makes anyone happy is also up for debate...

Anyway, that's how things stand.

Let's meet again in the main series.

Until then, stay healthy, everyone!

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